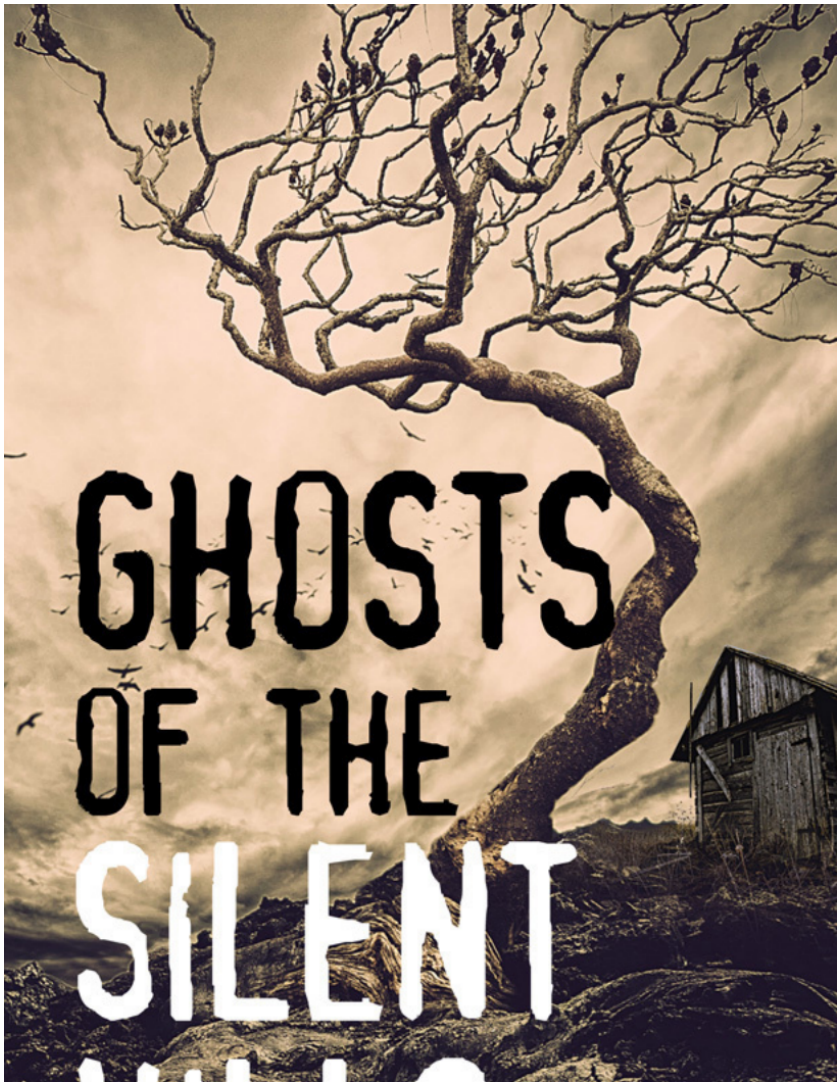
GHOSTS
OF THE
SILENT

THE DEAD DO NOT REST TILL THEY GET WHAT THEY WANT.

You have arrived in the hills. In here, you are surrounded by dense, menacing forests, enveloped in a deadly silence . . . You never know what lurks here in the cold, dark night.

Do not walk alone after sunset in the hills. A beautiful woman in white haunts the lonely pathways, looking to enchant and ensnare men . . .

All the people who died in accidents here . . . They say you hear their screams at night.

And the deserted lodges sitting amidst lush greenery and calm streams . . . Spirits lie in wait here, ready to prey on the living.

There are sceptics who did not heed these warnings. They tried to rationalize what they saw, what they felt. But when they came face to face with the beings that they believed didn't exist, they couldn't run away anymore . . .

Ghosts of the Silent Hills is a collection that will make your nights a little scarier, encompassing the very best spine-chilling stories based on true hauntings.

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GHOSTS OF THE SILENT HILLS

Stories based
on true hauntings

ANITA KRISHAN

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Dedicated to my late parents Prem Sagar and Vimla Sagar

With gratitude for their inimitable love and
with regret that they won't ever read my literary works!

To all my students who once had a rapacious thirst for stories,

I know time has flown, and you have grown faster than I could finally document these stories. I hope your insatiable craving for ghost stories hasn't dampened over the years.

Enjoy reading!

With love
Anita Krishan

Notes from the Author

An immaculate white blanket of snow on the rippling expanse of mountains and vales, a silent evening hush, flickering candlelight and lambent logs in a hearth throwing strange quivering shapes on the walls, and mesmerizing tales . . .

This is a typical cherished scene from the winter evenings at my childhood home—a British era cottage surrounded by a dense pine and oak forest in the suburbs of Shimla.

The day I was born, one winter evening of the year 1955, the whole town was buried under three feet of snow. With the roads blocked, it was almost a herculean task for my father to reach my mother to the hospital thirteen miles away. Such was life on the mountains. A number of my stories highlight difficulties faced by people living in such remote areas.

Winters used to be pretty harsh, but I found it the most charming of all seasons . . . with the long winter break in school and frequent heavy snowfalls. When the below-freezing temperatures snapped the overhead electric wires, the whole town plunged into darkness. The profound silence of the nightfall would then be broken only by the distant disconcerting sounds—the howling jackals or the squeaking flying foxes. The hush and the dim candlelight made a perfect backdrop for romance with the ghost stories. And, there was never a dearth of them in Shimla. Many ghostly encounters included in this book are the ones I have grown up listening to.

Growing up on the mountains has unsurpassed charm. The tranquil panorama, the lofty peaks, and the enigmatic alcoves—each corner hides unique mysteries to be uncovered. But of course, at times it can get lonely. Living in a secluded area of the town, in an era when TV had not invaded homes, I found my solace in books—they became my constant companions and the nourishment for my imagination. The passion for reading gradually brought in my passion for writing.

This book is an attempt at a different genre than all my previous published works. I hope the readers will enjoy reading these paranormal episodes as much as I have enjoyed writing them.

Foreword

Do ghosts really exist?

There are endless unsolved mysteries surrounding us. Do aliens exist? Have they been visiting our earth? Does the Yeti wander on the lofty Himalayas? What is the secret of the Bermuda Triangle? What happens to our life force, the spirit, after we die? Can it be reborn? Do ghosts exist? The puzzles have remained despite remarkable and consistent scientific discoveries.

Perhaps Albert Einstein proposed a scientific basis for the existence of ghosts. His first law of thermodynamics states that energy cannot be created or destroyed but only changes form. Then what happens to our body's energy when we die? Could that somehow manifest itself into wandering spirits that many people claim to have encountered?

We want to believe, because we want to connect to the Great Force Beyond—want to believe that we originated from and go after life to that Highest Spirit of God.

The idea of the drifting souls of the dead is an ancient one. Many cultures around the world believe in the paranormal. The Hindu religion conceives the existence of another realm, away from our earthly plane, that is inhabited by the spirits of the dead waiting to be reborn. These are the bioelectric energies that can't be destroyed. In simple terms, spirit is indestructible after a body dies. And, it reincarnates. It is also believed that all spirits are not reborn. Some, according to their karma, go to the higher level, closer to Paramatman or the Brahma, the supreme spirit of God. These spirits have attained *moksha* —liberation from the cycles of births and deaths.

Rebirth or reincarnation is a commonly accepted concept of many religions. Ghostly spirits that people claim to encounter are believed to be the spirits that for some reason fail to reach their realm and continue to drift on the earthly plane, perhaps because of their attachment to the loved ones, or seeking to complete the unfulfilled tasks from their previous lives.

The concept of ghosts and ghouls has appeared in countless stories—in Shakespeare's, Charles Dickens', Ruskin Bond's, Rudyard Kipling's, Stephen King's—just to mention a few.

The ghosts of the dead British gentlemen or ladies make repeated mention in most of the supernatural tales of Shimla. Many claim to have seen the

famous apparition of four headless pullers hauling a rickshaw on which sits a headless lady in a Victorian outfit in an area between the Mall Road and Chotta Shimla, locally known as 'Chudail baudi.' Tunnel number 33 and 103 on the Kalka-Shimla rail track too are claimed to be spooky places. People not only avoid entering them alone after dark, but even during the daytime. Charleville Mansion has its claim of being the most eerie building in the town. It's believed to be haunted by a British gentleman who lived and died in this house.

In 1973, when I was in final year of college, two of my classmates who lived below the Longwood Hill, began to miss their last class every day for they were scared to walk home after sunset. Allegedly, often at the twilight hour, on a particular stretch of that lonely road, a gentleman in a topcoat and hat accosted people and asked for a matchstick to light a cigarette. And then, he would disappear even before one could blink eyes.

One place rife with the supernatural tales that my family claimed to have experienced is a renowned building in the suburbs of Shimla town, currently a very popular five star hotel—Wildflower Hall. This building was constructed in the nineteenth century during the British rule on the Indian subcontinent, when Shimla acquired importance for being the summer capital of the country. Lord Kitchener, commander-in-chief of the Indian Armed forces, who owned this historic edifice, sold the property to Mr. Robert Hotz in 1909 when he left for England. Mrs. Hotz, a highly enterprising woman, renovated this elegant structure nestled in the lap of a pristine fir and cedar forest, and converted it into a luxury hotel. This building thus became an exclusive summer weekend haunt of the white officials and the rich. Over the weekends, horse buggies and rudimentary motorized vehicles of the era would abound the grounds of the building as the British couples or loners reached here for revelling. The desolate dwelling then suddenly acquired hustle-bustle. The waltz music and laughter would resound in the otherwise completely hushed environs. The denizens of the forest would become mute witnesses to the clattering noises of the tables being laid with food and wine. The aromas exuding from the kitchen would overpower the natural fragrances of the forest.

There were, of course, shady activities going on too. It was said, "The bell would ring in the morning for the pious to pray and for the impious to return to their beds."

With summers bidding goodbye for yet another year, the place would once again fall silent. The forest would briefly be returned its original peace and the native staff some reprieve.

After India attained independence in 1947, the building became the

property of the Government of India. After more than a century of slavery, the emancipated Indians had no time for amusement for which the building had been in use for a long time. They had a tough task ahead of them—rebuilding the country. Being an agricultural economy then, lacking any major industry including hospitality, this edifice was handed over to the Himachal Pradesh Government to run an agriculture school. The merrymaking was now replaced by serious lectures on modern agricultural practices.

The building remained under the Department of Agriculture for the next twenty-five years till it was taken over by the Department of Tourism and converted into a hotel once again. It remained so till 1993 when a massive fire razed the original structure to the ground.

A few stories of the encounters with the supernatural in this book are set here—in Wildflower Hall—during the period it was an agriculture school.

Who doesn't remember the spooky stories told by old aunts and college friends in candle-lit dark rooms? Such stories are more chilling when they come from real experiences and real encounters with things that exist in the deepest fears of our dreams. Having been born and brought up on the mountains, where the nightfall ushers a haunting hush over the landscape initiating a strange fear of the dark silence—I too grew up listening to scores of ghost stories. Living in an isolated area of the town, all rippling undulating shadows in the fading light of the evening would appear ghostly. Sometimes even I wonder—are the supernatural reports really based on true happenings which are beyond scientific explanation? Or are they fabulous imagination of over-fertile minds? Are they possibly nothing but hallucinations that were triggered by extreme anxiety or fear as explicated by the scientists? These questions will remain so until the science cracks the enigmatic.

My journey, as I put together this book, took me through my life in the silent hills, through those dark, dark nights, lonely British-era buildings, to the apartments and the life in the cities where one would least expect to find spooky things looming in the dark recesses. These stories come from the supernatural experiences that were shared by real people. I have only taken the writer's liberty to add flourishes for the right impact. One question I repeatedly asked myself while writing these stories was—do I believe in the existence of ghosts? I finally came to the conclusion that I believe despite not wanting to. Though, I am doubtful if I accept them indisputably. For, these are not my personal experiences. Neither do I have any direct evidence in support of these paranormal manifestations. But, at the time when they transpire just out of the blue, who is prepared to record them for the evidence?

Dear reader, to categorically accept the ghost stories you are going to read

in the following pages rests on your discretion. These tales are to be read simply to experience the thrill of a chill run down your spine. After all, who doesn't love a good ghost story!

Anita Krishan

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PART 1

On the desolate mountains
Wandered spirits
Some lonely
Some wanton

AN UNCANNY ATTACHMENT

Mashobra is a small hamlet about thirteen kilometres from the famous Himalayan town of Shimla, an hour's drive from there through a winding, twisting, narrow mountainous road, through a landscape of sheer virgin beauty. With the coming up of a whole lot of hotels, guesthouses, and resorts, it has become quite a crowded place today. Once, this was no more than a peaceful little village situated in the middle of a thick coniferous forest—stark and glorious.

Mashobra is my birthplace. Despite the fact that I spent only the first year of my life here, I have a special attachment to it. The lonely hills supporting a dense coniferous forest, the lush undergrowth, the exotic Himalayan birds, the glorious sunrise and sunset—they all hold a magical attraction for me. I love the intense mystical silence that gets interrupted only by the tweets of the birds, or by the chattering monkeys fighting inter-troupe battles. And, when the wind blows through the bush, it creates its own music—intensely haunting and hypnotizing.

This pristine forest is timeworn—many of these luxuriant deodars, pines, junipers, and oaks standing tall on these slopes have witnessed several generations come and go. They are mute witnesses to epochs of the known and the unknown history. Mystery is concealed in every nook and corner of these mesmerizing hills.

I remember one episode from the time I was a little schoolgirl. I had gone with Pa to Mashobra, where he was presiding over a seminar at the Gram Sevak Training Centre. His seminar had continued unendingly, leaving me bored and hungry. Our driver, Sant Ram, offered to take me for crispy hot pakoras to a dhaba at Talai, about a kilometre away. I jumped at the tempting

proposal.

An almost flat undulating patch of the grassland, that steadily rose up into a hillock to the south and subsided into a gradual valley to the north, Talai was a very alluring playground. I chased butterflies around a small insignificant pond of green, thick scum of moss, while hot pakoras were being freshly fried for me at the dhaba. Once we sat down to eat, Sant Ram informed me, "You know, Baby ji, this entire area acquires its name from this humble pool—*Talai."*

"Oh." My eyes roved around to unearth more mysteries. I then spotted a large mansion hidden behind a thick cluster of trees at the top of the hillock. 'Who lives in that house, Sant Ram?"

"That's the Faridkot Estate owned by the Raja of Faridkot. Faridkot is in Punjab."

'Hmm." Visible from the dhaba was also a dilapidated house. "Why is that house so broken and worn out? No one lives there?" I asked, enjoying a hot pakora dipped in yummy tamarind chutney.

"Oh Baby ji, it is supposed to be a *bhootia bangla* , a haunted house."

I stopped munching. My interest in a ghost made me forget how famished I was. I eyed the house in an entirely new perspective. Curiosity and fear were two strong contenders in my young mind, producing goose pimples all over my little body, but I allowed my curiosity to override. Hesitating a little, I asked, "Really? Tell me about it."

Sant Ram was quiet for a few seconds. He must have been making up his mind whether to tell me the story. "There had been a terrible fire here long ago." I watched the dhaba owner nod spiritedly. His upheld opinion added more flavour to the story. I now noticed the blackened stone structure and the frameless windows and doors—whatever had survived the assault of fire, and time. Sant Ram elaborated, "The fire broke out at night. The lady living alone in it was fast asleep and was burnt alive. Some think the fire was started deliberately—a sabotage. It is believed that her spirit still lives in the house."

"Who was the lady? Didn't she have children?"

"No, no children. She was very close to the Raja, his special friend, you know—girlfriend. He had given her this house." Sant Ram explained with a meaningful smile. He thought I wouldn't understand. But, I had instantly perceived what he meant; the way he exchanged glances with the dhaba owner. "But, no one dares to touch the house. People who tried had bad experiences once they began removing the wreckage."

"What bad experiences, Sant Ram?" I insisted timorously. It would be a nice ghost story to tell to my friends.

"They fell ill, or had nightmares in which a woman told them to leave her

house alone, etcetera, etcetera." Sant Ram's pursed lips and enlarged eyes unnerved me, which he didn't notice. "No one dares to repair or live in that house, despite it being located at a very prime site."

All of a sudden, it occurred to me that the ghost was perhaps watching me from the ruins. My little body shivered. I hurriedly gobbled the leftover pakoras. "Sant Ram, please take me back to Pa." The house, seemingly right out of a horror story, had begun to frighten me.

Much later, when I was a young college girl, I came to know about a creepier supernatural incident that had transpired here in Mashobra many years ago with someone very close to my family. It happened before I was born.

In 1952 at the behest of the government at New Delhi, a Gram Sevak Training Centre came up at Mashobra and Pa was appointed its first principal. My family lived on the first floor of the main building. Its ground floor had the administrative offices. The lecture rooms and the auditorium were housed in an adjacent building. The students' hostel and the staff quarters were about a kilometre walk down the hill, near the famous Coutts Garden.

The student and staff community wasn't a large one. There were about twenty students and six members of the teaching faculty. Only one of the lecturers, Raj Vaidya, was married.

It was a mid-January evening of the year 1953. Dark clouds had descended like a gigantic rolling ocean in the sky. It had been snowing non-stop for the past two days. Two feet of frozen vapour covered the landscape, hiding all colours under its white cape. The bitter cold had restrained folks inside their homes. The students and the teaching staff of the Centre were away on two months long winter break. Only my family and some of the administrative staff had remained behind at the Centre. The deserted expanse was even more desolate now—and overwhelmingly silent.

It was well after dinnertime. My parents were in the sitting room, warming their feet in the dying fire at the fireplace and exchanging notes on the day's events before retiring for the night. They were jolted out of their reverie by a loud knock on the door. "I wonder who has come at this time," Pa got up from his chair to check on the unexpected caller. When the door was opened, in breezed a draught of chilled wind and Centre's compounder Krishan Das Negi. Wrapped in a blanket over his khadi coat, *bushehri* cap, and a home-knit woollen muffler, he stood shivering with a worried frown creasing his brow. Pa quickly shut the door.

"What brings you here at this time, Krishan?"

Krishan rubbed his ice-cold hands. "Sir, Hari Ram is running a very high fever for the past two days, and it's showing no signs of subsiding. I have

been giving him paracetamol tablet every four hours since yesterday, but it hasn't made any difference to his fever. There is no cough, no running nose."

Hari Ram was the peon at the Centre.

"Stomach infection?" Pa asked.

"No, Sir. No diarrhoea, no vomiting. He's complaining of a severe headache though. I fed him half a slice of bread and half a cup of tea with great difficulty. He hasn't eaten anything else the entire day. I don't know what is wrong with him. I checked his temperature before coming to you. It was 105° Fahrenheit. Since the evening he has also been blabbering incoherently. He's very serious, Sir. He needs to see a doctor."

"Hmm . . . We must admit him in a hospital immediately." Pa shook his head worriedly.

"It is too late now, Sir. Driver Pitamber has left and his house is three kilometres away. There is no way we can take Hari Ram to the hospital now."

"Oh! Not much can be done immediately in this bad weather. Keep cold compresses on his forehead and try to keep his fever down. If his condition doesn't improve by the morning, go and fetch Pitamber from his house and take him to Shimla, to Snowdon Hospital."

Krishan appeared dismayed. It wouldn't be easy to plod through mounds of snow early in the morning in the bitter cold, especially if he was going to be looking after the patient the entire night. "Pitamber should be reporting on duty around nine, Sir. Even if I leave at seven to call him, we can't be back before nine."

"You forget Krishan, tomorrow is Sunday. Pitamber will not be coming. Go as early as you can. Let's not take chances."

"Oh! Yes, Sir, I will leave as soon as I can." And Krishan once again retreated into the dark, cold night.

There was no improvement in weather conditions the next morning. It was a dark, cold, and blustery day. Around nine, there were noises of hectic activity outside. The frozen engine of the jeep took consistent effort and warm water to come to life. Krishan and Pitamber brought Hari Ram on a chair and lifted him into the jeep. He had lost tremendous weight in just a few days and looked so pallid that Pa was taken aback. A strange abnormal look in his eyes was frightening. Despite his condition, he threw a weak smile at Pa. "You'll be fine, Hari Ram," Pa assured him, "be strong."

Hari Ram nodded faintly. "I'll be back soon," he whispered.

Pa stroked his head. "Of course, you'll be!"

Before they left, Pa gave Krishan strict instructions, "Call me as soon as you reach the hospital. I will speak with the doctor on duty." Though he

personally knew a few doctors at the hospital, he also knew that it being Sunday, not many doctors would be available at the hospital, except the ones on emergency duty.

"I am worried about Hari Ram's health," Pa later expressed to Ma. "He looked so ghostly pale. I wonder what's wrong with him." Then he added, "Hope the doctor on duty is efficient."

By lunchtime, there was still no news of the sick man. "If everything went well, they should have reached the hospital by ten thirty, maybe eleven, even if they went slowly." Pa eyed the telephone. "I had specifically asked Krishan to call me. Why hasn't he?" His restlessness made Ma concerned for him.

"Why don't you call the hospital?" she posed.

"I have tried the hospital reception. Can't get through." Pa shook his head dejectedly.

"They must have got busy looking after the patient, or maybe the telephone there is out of order. You know it's very common in winters. Wires snag." Ma tried to put his mind at ease.

The clock ticked on. There was no information about Hari Ram's health even by the evening. Finally, at five o'clock, Pa had had enough of waiting around in tension. Grabbing his overcoat he got into his snowshoes. "Where are you going in this cold? It'll be dark soon." Ma eyed him anxiously.

"Where are the boys? I have to go and check."

"You can't walk till the hospital, ten miles away, in this snow," Ma expressed her apprehension.

"No, I am not going to the hospital. Of course not! Will just walk till Talai. I need some exercise."

Ma nodded. A short walk would do him good, ease him out a little. She ardently prayed for Hari Ram's health as she stood at the window watching Pa trudge through the snow. He had been away for barely fifteen minutes when Ma rushed out on hearing the sound of an approaching vehicle. It was the Centre's jeep, as she had expected. Pa alighted from it. He looked pale and immensely miserable. In an instant, Ma realized that things weren't good.

Pitamber got off and rushed to help others from the back of the jeep. Krishan was next to dismount. Then both of them removed Hari Ram from the jeep. He was wrapped in a sheet from head to toe.

"Oh my God! What happened?" Ma was shaken and upset.

"Sorry, Memsahib, we couldn't bring him back alive," Krishan spoke through his choked throat. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Pitamber sobbed openly. "He was such a wonderful man. Why did he have to go so early?"

Ma closed her eyes and silently prayed for the departed. The handsome

cheerful face of Hari Ram hovered before her eyes. He was too young to die. After the initial shock she hurried inside to her children. She wanted to keep them away from this unfortunate death. They were too tender to be exposed.

It was later that the details were divulged to her.

That morning the jeep had barely covered the distance of about four miles when they came across a huge mound of snow completely blocking the road. It was a minor avalanche but couldn't be cleared without the help of the Public Works Department. But there was no way to deliver a message to them. A wagon driver, who was stranded on the other side of the blockade, agreed to return to Shimla and arrange for the required.

Hari Ram's condition continued to deteriorate. His body went into tremors and he began to get disoriented. By and by he went silent. The men accompanying him thought he had fallen asleep.

The temperature was dropping fast and the light was fading. They waited and waited for someone to arrive to clear the road. None came. When Krishan tried waking Hari Ram up, to make him drink some tea, he realized he wasn't hot anymore. Had the fever subsided? He then realized Hari Ram wasn't breathing. He tried reviving him, all in vain. Hari Ram's spirit had long been released and his body now lay lifeless.

Hari Ram belonged to a remote village in Theog *tehsil* of Himachal. He had lost both his parents, however his two older brothers still lived in the village with their families. Pa telephoned the agriculture inspector posted at Theog, asking him to inform Hari Ram's family of the misfortune. He expected Hari Ram's brothers to take his body to their village for the last rites. Meanwhile, the body was kept buried in snow for two days. When even by the third day nobody reached Mashobra to claim the body, Pa sent another urgent message. The body couldn't be kept forever. This time he was told that Hari Ram's family was finding it difficult to travel due to the blocked roads. It was left on Pa to undertake the required ceremonies.

Early next morning a priest was arranged. He came reluctantly; he couldn't be blamed. It hadn't stopped snowing for the past four days. More than three feet of snow covered the entire expanse of the town, draping it in white as if in mourning for the departed.

Hari Ram's body was taken in the jeep to the cremation grounds. Clearing a small patch, they made the funeral pyre under a makeshift tin roof. It became very difficult to light the damp wood. Finally, Krishan consigned the body to flames after a great struggle and many tins of ghee. The priest half-heartedly chanted mantras for the peace of the departed soul and shivered continuously in the cold. As if this wasn't enough, a raging blizzard struck soon after the pyre was lit. Blinded by the snow crystals, they all had to beat a

hasty retreat.

The next day when Krishan and Pitamber went to the cremation ground, they were stumped. Hari Ram's body hadn't burnt completely. The keeper of the cremation ground had neglected his job of watching over the burning pyre. They were now in a dilemma. "The best thing now will be to do the needful in Haridwar," suggested Krishan. Hari Ram's remains were anyway to be taken to Haridwar, as customary in Hindu religion.

"How will we take these half-burnt remains there?" Pitamber probed. "The interstate bus service has been suspended due to the snowstorms. And, I don't think I can take the risk of driving through this storm. We'll get stranded for sure. So don't even make that suggestion to Principal Sahib."

Neither were the remains in a condition to be kept for too long. The keeper of the cremation grounds suggested burying the remains of Hari Ram in a suitable place. Realizing it to be the most expedient proposal in the given circumstances, the men complied and kept silent over the whole affair.

Early March, with the culmination of the winter break, the hustle-bustle of the institute was restored. In the close-knit community of the Centre, the death of a young man was shocking—almost unbelievable. Hari Ram's affable smile, happy-go-lucky persona, and free spirit had fetched him lots of friends among the staff and students. Now he was so far away from them all.

A condolence meeting was held, which was attended by all except one person associated with the community. Raj Vaidya, a senior staff member, had returned without his family. His wife, Neema, had stayed back to spend more time with her parents. Looking after the younger daughter, just a few months old, was easier with the help of her mother.

The routine at the institute resumed. The cold began to wane, and with it the memory of the departed. A new man replaced the deceased and life's routines continued.

Summers arrived in May and Neema Vaidya returned home. The day temperatures were comfortable twenty-five degrees and the nights were cool. The bright sunshine had begun to spread its golden warm cape over the mountains. The Honeysuckle creeper scrambling up on one of the pillars in her house's portico was in full bloom and had spread its heavenly aroma far and wide. The chestnut tree was once again filled with prickly fruits. The apple, plum, and apricot trees on the hilly terraces were laden with small unripe fruits.

May 10, 1953, around four in the afternoon—the routine bustle in the students' hostel adjoining Neema's house was missing. Usually, the students returned after classes around this time, but presently the annual examinations

were going on and today's paper was scheduled for the afternoon. It would finish at five. Her husband was on invigilation duty and hadn't come home for lunch.

The hectic toil since the morning had exhausted the mother of two children. Ever since her return a few days ago, her seven-months-old Chitra had been a bit cranky, taking time to adjust to her new environment. Her three-year-old Veera was happy to be back with her father and in an overly playful mood. Today, much to her relief, both her girls had decided on a long afternoon nap.

It was a warm languorous afternoon inducing drowsiness and Neema took advantage of the opportunity. A short nap of half an hour was very rejuvenating. Once up, she decided to finish her knitting. There was no season in Shimla when the children could do without woollens.

Opening the window of her sitting room wider to enjoy a fresh cool breeze, she sat down on an easy chair facing the window with her knitting. She must have been at her work for barely five minutes when she dropped a stitch and got focused on retrieving it. It was then that she heard a voice. Someone greeted her from the open window. "How are you, Memsa'ab?"

She raised her eyes from her task to check on the visitor. A man in a loose whitish shirt stood just outside the open window. "Oh, Hari Ram? I'm fine. Seen you after a long time. How are you?"

"How's Veera?"

"Children are doing well. Thank you."

"I'll take Veera with me."

"Thank you, Hari Ram. Not now. She's sleeping. With great difficulty she went to sleep." Neema smiled. "Maybe later in the evening you can take her to play outside."

Hari Ram nodded and left.

She found nothing amiss except Hari Ram had sounded very different. His voice was much deeper and distant, as if he was making an effort to speak.

Hari Ram had often looked after Veera. He was such a fine person. After Chitra had been born, he had been a big help when Neema was struggling alone with the household chores and her children. Before she had gone home to Mandi for winters, he had come so often, whenever he had some free time at hand. He loved to play with her little girls, especially Veera—a very happy and lively child, and very pretty with lovely pinkish complexion and large expressive hazel eyes. Ever since she had learnt to talk, she had become a non-stop chatterbox. Neema would smile seeing Hari Ram burst into laughter at her baby prattle. *It'll be nice if Hari Ram came in the evening to take Veera out to play. Raj will come home tired, and probably won't have the energy* , Neema reflected

and continued to knit blithely.

Raj came home late that evening, around six thirty. Students had appeared in his subject's exam that day, so it had taken him some time to count the papers and make the bundles. With the bundles under his arm, he reached home with the intention of starting to correct them immediately, after his usual cup of tea.

The children were up and playful. It was a pleasure to come back home to his lovely family. The couple sat down to their evening tea in the dining corner of their sitting room. Little Chitra was happily gurgling in her father's lap and Veera was making all efforts to climb onto his lap too.

"What an attention seeker she's becoming! Wouldn't let her father have a cup of tea peacefully." Neema gently held the child's hand and pulled her towards her. "Veera, go and play with your toys."

"No, I want to sit on Papa's lap. You take Chitra away," the three-year-old persisted.

"Papa is tired, *beta* ."

"No, Papa is not tired. He will play with me."

"Now, don't be an adamant child, and come here," the mother changed her tone to sound firm.

"Let her be, Neema. She needs an outing. Though I need to start correcting the papers, I'll take the girls out for a while, after I finish the tea."

"No, you don't have to. You can do your corrections. Hari Ram said he would come to take Veera out to play. He's late. Maybe he's on his way."

Raj stared at her. "What? What did you say?"

"Hari Ram had come in the afternoon, around four. I told him to come in the evening and take Veera out to play," Neema reiterated. She couldn't understand the changed expression on her husband's face. She lifted her cup to take a sip.

"Are you sure it was Hari Ram, the peon? It could have been someone else," Raj spoke gingerly.

Neema put her cup down on the saucer. "Why someone else? Don't I know Hari Ram? He used to take Veera out to play so often, and at times help me with the household work."

"It could have been the new peon who has joined recently," Raj affirmed despite his doubts. He knew that the new peon was nowhere close to resembling Hari Ram. He was short and stout, unlike the deceased man. Moreover, Neema hadn't even met the new peon.

What's wrong with Raj? Does he think I can't recognize people well? "Why are you saying that? Being away for a few months has not made me forget Hari Ram's

face."

"When did he last come to help you?" Raj spoke warily, his heart in his mouth. Beads of perspiration had collected on his brows.

Neema remained unaware of it all. "Hmm . . . He came after a long time today." Neema frowned and then said, "In fact—for the first time since my return from Mandi."

"Did he come in-inside the house?"

Neema wondered why Raj sounded so anxious and afraid.

"No, he stood outside—at the window. Children were asleep so I didn't feel the need to let him in. Though he will come now; he said so."

Neema sipped tea and watched Raj looking at the window as if it was something out of this world. Why was he acting so weird?

The window was still open. Beyond it, the twilight was slowly slipping into night. Only the patio pillar was faintly visible in the grey haze. The cool breeze of the mountains streamed in generously through the window, wafting in a little chill. Neema couldn't grasp what was making Raj so nervous. He was trying to stand but couldn't since Veera sat at his feet. "Neema, please hurry, shut the window." The desperation in his voice was palpable.

Why does he want to shut out the lovely breeze? Neema reluctantly got up. She peeped out of the window. The fragrance of the blooming flowers was heavenly. She took a deep breath and lingered at the window for a few seconds.

"Neema, shut the window," Raj's voice rumbled, a mixture of concern and fear.

"Okay, okay. I'm closing it. Why are you getting so worked up?" Neema grudgingly closed and bolted the window and returned to finish her tea. She frowned when she took a sip. It had gone cold. She liked to drink it hot. She peeped into Raj's empty cup and then picked up her cup and moved towards the kitchen to reheat it. Raj was sitting absolutely still on his chair, looking pale and disturbed.

What's gone wrong with his mood, Neema wondered. "Would you like another cup of tea, dear?"

"No."

When Neema returned with her steaming cup refilled, she found Raj still sitting frozen, in the same pose as she had left him. He was tightly holding on to his daughters. Chitra was peacefully playing with her father's tie. Veera had lovingly rested her head on his chest and was sucking her thumb.

"Is something the matter? Are you not feeling well?" Neema sat down with her cup of tea.

"I really don't understand . . ."

"Understand what?" Neema lifted her cup and brought it close to her lips.

"Hari Ram is dead."

"What rubbish! He was here around four in the evening." She frowned. She was about to take a sip but her hand froze in mid-air. "Did he die after that? He seemed all right. Was it an accident?"

"No. He died this winter, when we were away," Raj spoke slowly, guardedly. He didn't want to frighten Neema. But he hadn't chosen the right moment.

A choked scream escaped Neema's throat. She dropped the cup with its hot tea on her lap, scalding her thighs. The cup rolled down, crashed on the floor, and broke into fragments. The children got frightened at the clattering and their mother's sudden reaction. They began to wail. Neema's vision automatically traversed to the window. She was relieved it was shut. She was shivering and her burnt thighs hurt. But she remained glued to the chair. The couple gazed at each other.

Had Neema known about the man's death and then had seen his ghost, it could have been taken as a figment of her imagination, a hallucination. But she had no inkling to the fact that Hari Ram had died while she was away to Mandi. No one had bothered to let her know. For Hari Ram was a forgotten man now, out of most lives and minds.

After comforting their daughters, the couple rushed to the little shrine in the corner of their bedroom. They lit a lamp, burnt a bunch of incense sticks, and offered prayers for the peace of the wandering soul. They prayed for the safety of their daughters. "Please protect us. No harm should ever come to our little family," they appealed to God.

Later when Neema went to the kitchen to cook dinner, her husband followed her with his daughters still held protectively in his arms. The silence around their house felt unnerving. The students were busy preparing for the next day's exam and there wasn't the usual bustle around. Neema loudly and continuously incanted hymns to keep the restive spirit at bay. She could barely give attention to her cooking.

As they sat down for dinner, Raj expressed, "Neema, let's just keep quiet over the incident. There is no need to spread panic among the students. Most will not believe us anyway."

Neema nodded. There was hardly anybody here with whom she shared that kind of rapport except with Mrs. Sharma, the principal's wife. She was like an older sister. But if Raj was insisting, there must be a good reason for not disclosing it. Unless the ghost appeared to more people, it may be a good idea to keep it a secret.

The next few weeks went by smoothly. There were no unwanted visits, no

eerie visitor. The dread and dismay that the uncanny visit had caused the couple slowly began to fade from their lives.

The routine at the training centre went on undisturbed. None except the couple had the knowledge about a wandering spirit among them. But they had prayed for its peace, and perhaps that had had its effect. Hopefully, the spirit had gone to its eternal rest.

The examinations at the school were over and the results were declared. The students prepared to go home; the first year batch on annual vacations, whereas the graduates would soon begin jobs. The weather was warmer than the previous month. The bushes on the hills were filled with vibrant blooms. Their exotic, heavenly fragrance infused hearts with joy.

Pa decided to organize a special treat for his students—and a farewell for the outgoing batch. After some deliberation, he came to the conclusion that nothing would be more appealing to the young folks than the Indian cinema.

It was very rare for the residents of this far-removed mountainous region to be able to watch a movie. The nearest cinema hall was in Shimla, not easily accessible to all. Also, it would be a big hassle to take everyone to a theatre at Shimla. So, he decided to bring a cinema hall to the institution.

He spoke with the Director of the Public Relations Department, and he agreed to send his mobile cinema van complete with a screen, projector, and spools of the latest Hindi film, *Aankhen* , starring Bharat Bhushan and Nalini Jaywant. He would also send along his technicians to set up a mini cinema hall for a day.

When the announcement was made about the show, there was an air of excitement in the campus. Indian films became the hot topic for discussions —the actors, the movies' songs and singers—the debate kept on till the cinema van arrived on Friday morning.

Though the movie was to begin after lunch, at two, all students arrived from their hostel by ten in the morning, as soon as the word spread that the cinema van had arrived. They requested the canteen owner to prepare early lunch and he happily obliged. He didn't want to miss the show either. So, a picnic in the lawns before the movie got added to the entertainment package.

The technicians got busy setting up the movie theatre, surrounded by a crowd of chattering, curious, excited students.

By one thirty, a big crowd had assembled outside the makeshift cinema hall. Word had spread in the two-mile radius and many families arrived uninvited for the show. So the movie was running a full house.

Pa's contentment was marred by the fact that Ma wouldn't be joining him. She had developed a severe headache and had declared her inability to come.

Another missing member was Neema Vaidya. Her infant daughter was running a fever and she had decided not to risk exposing her further.

The machinery developed some snag and the movie show could begin only by two thirty.

Once the black and white movie began, the excited chatter instantly died down. Although the area around Neema's house was never a crowded zone, due to the presence of the student community, it was seldom that still during the daytime. There would always be some kind of activity, sounds, and laughter around. Today, an overwhelming silence hovered on the region like hushed mist over a calm ocean.

Ma swallowed a paracetamol tablet with water and decided to take it easy. It was a rare opportunity to rest in the afternoon. All children, including the hyper youngest, were away for at least three hours. She made herself snug inside a quilt. Soon the medicine took effect and she was fast asleep.

A kilometre away, Neema fed both her daughters. Chitra had been restive since the morning; her fever made her cantankerous. Neema put nasal drops into her blocked nose, soothed her, sang her a lullaby, and finally managed to lull her to sleep. Veera was playing with her toys. Her sleeping hours were decreasing day by day as her curious little mind was focused on the discovery mission.

It was a lovely summer afternoon with a cool and pleasant breeze blowing gently. Neema opened the window to allow fresh air inside her bedroom. She stood there, admiring the blooming flowers even though the intense silence in the area was making her uneasy. A fleeting memory of the eerie incident of last month crossed her mind but she immediately tossed it out. Hadn't they prayed ardently for the peace of Hari Ram's soul? She once again joined her hands and said a quick, silent prayer.

But the loneliness depressed her today. She felt left out. She wanted to watch the movie. She had seen only two in her lifetime. That was before her children had been born. Raj hadn't even offered to stay back with the babies and allow her to go. But then he was needed to maintain discipline among the students. Neema heaved a deep sigh and withdrew from the window.

Since Veera was up and playing, she couldn't lie down to rest even though her back felt stiff. There was some stitching left to be completed. She had been stitching dresses for her daughters. She kept the sewing machine on the table and sat down to work on it.

An icy draught of air entered her room through the window. She shivered

a little. The wheel of the hand-operated sewing machine continued moving in circles. The needle went up and down to attach the small bodice of the frock with the skirt. A sudden dimness in the light made her wonder if it was getting cloudy. She had her laundry drying on the clothesline outside. The weather in Shimla was so unpredictable. The pre-monsoon rains would start any day, declaring an end to the divine summer season of Shimla—her mind kept wandering from one thought to another. Her hands deftly kept on stitching the dress.

A stray dog enjoying the late afternoon sun in the porch suddenly whined, breaking her thought process. The whining became distant. The dog had rushed away. Had someone hurt it?

"How are you, Memsa'ab?" the voice greeted her from the window. "I have come to take Veera with me . . ." The sound was different from the last time. It was resounding and hollow—like an old broken record. It was not a natural human voice.

Neema's hand froze at the wheel of the machine. The tick-tack of the running machine slowed down. The wheel continued to move for a while and then gradually stopped.

The profound silence added to the shock. A chill was running down her spine. She couldn't dare to raise her eyes to look at the visitor. Her heart shuddered with fright—her hands and legs trembled. *Why is Hari Ram after my Veera? Where does he want to take my child? Doesn't he realize he's dead?*

From the corner of her eye she noted that Veera had stopped playing with her toy. She was gazing at the window and smiling. She had recognized the visitor. Then the child slowly got up and began to move towards the window with her arms extended. On an impulse, she glanced at the window. Hari Ram wasn't like the last time. He was ghostly pale, with his eyes sunken into two large sockets. His attention was focused on Veera. A soft smile played on his lips. An enigmatic smile. Her baby was now just four feet away from the window. Neema screamed and jumped as if she had received a thousand volts current. She rushed, grabbed Veera and pulled her back. The child was shaken at the abrupt and rough treatment. She began to howl. Neema lifted her in her arms. She darted towards her little baby calmly sleeping in her cot. Snatching her up she ran towards the door. She undid the latch with a jerk. She didn't stop to put on her slippers, didn't glance towards the visitor. Barefoot, she dashed out and into the absolutely desolate exteriors. In ten seconds she was running away from her house, her howling daughters tightly clutched in each of her arms.

She knew no help would be available here today. She rushed straight towards the Institute building. Sprinting up the narrow pathway, she reached

the broad, dusty road. Veera was now clinging onto her and had stopped crying. But the small baby had been rudely woken from her sleep and was frightened at the abrupt and rough handling. She was wailing her lungs out.

Neema was breathless but she didn't slacken her pace. She ran like a possessed woman. Sharp stones pricked her soft feet, the bare skin got pierced by the thorns and began to bleed. Her strong instinct to save her child from the looming danger made her heedless to all the physical pain. Tears streamed down her cheeks making her almost blind. She reached the uphill path that led to the Institute building and her salvation. As she began to climb it, she slipped over a twig and lost her balance. She fell on her knees, however prevented her daughters from getting hurt by supporting them with her elbows planted firmly on the ground. Her knees and elbows were severely bruised. She remained mindless of the injuries. She didn't even realize that she was badly hurt. With superhuman efforts, she sprang to her feet again. She threw a quick glance behind her. A cloud of dust that she had produced was thinning. A shadow was clearly visible behind the dust screen. Following her.

She muffled her scream and ran with all her might. The path was steep and rocky, cut into broad rough steps. With her two daughters held tightly in her grip, she sprinted on. Neither did she reduce her speed nor turn to look back again. On and on she raced till she reached outside the building. She stopped there for a moment for she could hardly breathe now. Her head was spinning. A severe pain tightened her chest. She took a few deep breaths to steady herself and instinctively glanced to her left, towards the path she had just traversed. The ghostly figure of Hari Ram stood at the edge of the path, expressionless and somewhat vague now, almost a translucent shadow of his original self. It was the most frightening ghostly apparition Neema had ever seen. She shrieked and dashed towards the door. With both her hands engaged, she was momentarily at a loss how to open the door. It was then that she sensed it—a sudden pressure on her left arm and a strong jerk where she was holding Veera. She tightened her grip on her daughter. "Leave her alone," she screamed and banged the door with her head. The door was not bolted. It swung open and she stumbled into the reception area. She couldn't maintain her balance and crashed against a table, her waist taking the blow. There was no one down here, not a single person from the office staff. She rushed up the staircase but stopped halfway. She couldn't go on, not anymore. Her waist hurt badly. Her lungs were bursting. Her arms were stiff from exertion. She couldn't hold her elder one any longer. She needed one hand to take the support of the railing. The child understood and clung onto her, giving her a free hand. Holding on to the railing she pushed herself up and up, one step at a time, with all her might, with the last bit of her strength, guided by her

maternal instincts.

The creepy scream had woken Ma up. She still lay in bed, wondering if she had been dreaming. She was unsure. But her headache was gone. She felt much better. She looked at the clock. It was close to five. The movie should be getting over shortly. Anyway, it was also time to go to the kitchen. Children would come home hungry.

It was then that she heard a desperate knock on her door. "Didi . . . Didi, please open the door. Didi, quick . . . Please hurry . . ."

Ma recognized Neema's voice. Why was she screaming and rasping? She sounded so awfully panicky. Ma jumped out of the bed and ran to open the door. The moment she did that, Neema swooned and fell unconscious in her arms. Ma managed to grab Chitra and prevented the baby from falling on the hard floor and getting badly hurt. Veera hopped off her mother's lap at the end moment and stood next to her sprawled body—shocked, shivering, and snivelling.

Ma intuitively shut the door and locked it. She then put the baby on the divan, and rushed to fetch water for Neema. Her condition frightened her; tears-stained cheeks, dishevelled hair, her salwar torn at the bloodied knees, arms and feet coated with mud and blood. Something terrible had happened.

When she returned, Neema had regained her consciousness and was looking around with her eyes wide open. Veera sat clinging to her mother.

Neema was wheezing and trembling. She appeared so frightened that even Ma was shaken. She hadn't ever seen such intense fear in anyone's eyes. What had gone wrong with poor Neema? Perhaps she needed a doctor. "Here, Neema, sip some water. It'll make you feel better." Neema accepted the glass of water in her shaking hands as Ma rushed towards the door to call for help.

"Don't—please don't open the door." Neema could barely speak. Her hoarse, desperate whisper was terrifying. Ma halted and turned back. What was outside that had so badly frightened Neema? "Didi, don't go anywhere. Don't leave me alone," Neema cried pitiably. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. Ma was confused whom to pacify—the baby who was hysterically crying and howling, or Neema who was sobbing and looking at her with utter helplessness.

Ma returned from the door. She picked up Chitra in her arms and tried soothing the baby. "Are you well, Neema? What happened?"

Neema swallowed a few sips of water and nodded slowly from where she sat—on the floor, resting against the wall. "Didi, Hari Ram had come to my house—stood outside my window. He wanted to take Veera with him. He's dead! Isn't he?" Ma couldn't even nod, so shocked was she at what Neema was stating. She simply stared at her. "Where does he want to take my baby?"

Neema's sobs changed into hiccups. "Please don't let him take my baby away, please," she pleaded piteously and grabbed Veera to hold her tightly in her lap. Ma was by now breathing rapidly, her heart almost jumping out of her mouth. Neema raised her voice, "Didi, he has followed me. He is here—outside."

Ma became stock-still. She instinctively glanced at the window. Dusk had begun to fall on the landscape. A few stray dogs suddenly yowled. A murder of crows rose and flew past the window, fluttering and cawing. Just then with a loud report, a windowpane of the room cracked. Ma shrieked louder than Neema and then loudly began to chant the Gayatri Mantra in a shaky voice to keep the wandering spirit from entering her house.

SHADOW IN THE DARK

March 1956—Pa received the appointment letter to join the Agriculture Institute at Wildflower Hall as its principal. It was an isolated building about fifteen kilometres beyond Shimla. My family had lived in many remote places, so this transfer was accepted without any concern. Apart from a few towns and scattered villages, the rest of Himachal was anyhow endless lonely stretches of high rugged mountains and arcane valleys.

Enclosed by a lush thick pine and deodar forest, wrapped by tranquil silence barring sporadic sounds of nature—it was a divine place to live. This majestic structure stood on the ridge of a mountain range, at 8250 feet above the sea level, with no sign of any other human habitation for miles around it. There were no distractions for the residents—no shops, no noisy bazaars, not even a roadside dhaba or teashop within the radius of five kilometres.

The building has withstood the travails of time; though the initial structure has been lost to a fire, and the calm to a busy market at its foot. But, once the uphill road towards Wildflower Hall initiates, one gets to experience some measure of the original solitude.

When Pa joined it, the institute was in its rudimentary stage with about fifteen male students enrolled for the course. The workforce comprised of five faculty members, three clerical and some general staff, not to miss one night guard.

Pa was the only person residing there with his family, as most others were bachelors. My family lived in the East Wing of the ground floor. Rest of the ground floor housed offices and laboratories. The first floor had lecture rooms and the top floor was allocated for students' and the faculty's boarding. The rest of the staff lived in the row of quarters on the west side, behind the

main building.

I was too small to have understood the bizarre experiences my family underwent there. But, so often have these incidents been narrated at the family get-togethers that I feel I have been a direct participant.

It began with Pa's younger brother Narendra—Nandy for short, about twenty-five then—tall, handsome, and reckless. After earning bachelor's degree in engineering, he had recently joined the State Public Works Department, and had been posted for the past few months at Jeori, about 150 kilometres beyond Shimla, bordering the district of Kinnaur. My family shifted to Wildflower Hall a few months after Nandy had left for Jeori.

Towards the end of May, having gotten an overdose of loneliness, Nandy called up Pa to apprise him of his plan of visiting us a week later. He had checked on the location and the directions to reach our residence. He would be taking the last bus on Friday that left Jeori at about six in the evening and reach us around ten-thirty, he happily informed.

"No, no, take an early bus, Nandy. Six will be too late to start," Pa protested. He knew how absurdly foolhardy his younger brother was.

"Bhai ji, I need to attend to some urgent meeting that Friday noon and cannot leave before that. I will be with you latest by eleven. That is not too late, unless you sleep very early."

Pa insisted, "Don't be silly, Nandy. Night journey is not safe on that route. I know the road. It's too narrow and dangerous. I insist that you start latest by the afternoon on Friday, or take an early bus on Saturday."

Nandy complained, "But my leave begins on Saturday. And I don't want to waste a day travelling!"

"Nandy, safety comes before anything else. Leave early on Saturday then," Pa ordered.

"Shall try." Then realizing his brother's concern, Nandy tried resting it, "You don't have to worry about me. I won't be taking any risk. Just a normal bus ride! And, you know our Himachali drivers who drive on this route—they are the best." Before his brother could say more, the two-minute trunk call, the only means of electronic communication those days, was over.

Knowing Nandy well, Pa knew that he would catch the late evening bus on Friday or none. The road was accident-prone; it wasn't worth taking risks. Moreover, it would not be easy to locate the isolated building at night, which sat in the middle of nowhere. Also, an uphill climb of more than a kilometre would have to be covered on foot and there was no roadside lighting yet.

After putting down the receiver and shaking his head in worry and irritation, Pa voiced his apprehension to Ma. "Nandy knows I will remain worried till he reaches here on time. But he just won't listen!"

Friday, as he had expected, was a hectic one for Nandy. He wanted to finish all the assignments so that he could spend a peaceful holiday with his brother and his family. Reaching late, in the middle of the night, or being alone in a secluded place were the matters that bothered him the least.

At six he sent a peon to the bus stop to request the driver to wait for him. He then hurried home to pick up his stuff and rushed to catch the last bus to Shimla. Once inside the bus, he settled down on his reserved seat behind the driver. Bheem Singh, the bus conductor with a large curved-up moustache that made him look more like a warrior than a bus conductor, approached him to check if he was comfortable. Nandy was, after all, a special passenger —an educated Sahib. "The bus will reach Shimla at about eleven thirty, Sahib. We're late today," he responded to Nandy's query with a large gratifying grin, withstanding that Nandy was the cause for the delay. Nandy returned his grin with a sheepish smile and simultaneously calculated that he would reach his destination latest by eleven.

Stretching his legs on the aisle, he surveyed his co-passengers. There were only eight more travellers—traders or farmers. They were all locals, apparent from their outfit—churidar pyjamas, kurtas, high-collared rough woollen jackets, and bushehri caps adorned with Monal pheasant's feathers. They acknowledged Nandy's presence with polite smiles and Namaste and Nandy returned their greetings. Before boarding the bus, he had noted a few large jute sacks stuffed with local produce, chiefly potatoes, on the rooftop carrier. The crop fetched a better price at Shimla market. A few were perhaps going to purchase supplies from Shimla for their business establishments here.

Completing the scrutiny, Nandy settled down to read Earnest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* , the book that had fetched the author the Nobel Prize in literature two years ago. The rickety bus plying on the narrow bumpy road kept him alert and his attention divided between the book and the road. It was certainly not an easy drive. He and his eight co-passengers were entirely at the mercy of the driver's proficiency.

The scenic beauty around was stunning and not worth missing even for the engrossing book. The almost straight walls of the high mountains stood on one side and deep cliffs dropped down hundreds of feet into the narrow gorge on the other, where gushed the river Sutlej through its rapids—cascading and roaring. Sometimes the river ran almost next to the road, through a broad valley, calm and serene, adding spurting music to the rattle of the bus. Then it began to drift away—its serpentine course once again plunging deep into a ravine. There, in the fading light, it looked like a silver band waving in a breeze. At places, if Nandy peeped out of the window it gave him a fright, as there seemed hardly any road between the wheel of the

bus and the sudden drop from the precipice.

He focused his attention on the tall stately conifers that covered the hillsides. The undergrowth here rendered the hills lush green. A few curves later the vegetation was suddenly gone as if by a magic spell, and the mountain became bare and rocky. The rocks were a spectacle of colours—light grey, slate grey, green, blazing copper. Huge rocks jutted out of the mountain wall ready to roll down. There was occasional rain of small rocks. This part was known to be very unstable and the drivers had to be at full alert in case a big boulder began rolling down all of a sudden. Nandy sat stiff, at the edge of the seat, sending quick silent prayers. He was well versed with the geology of the region, which now, in the fading twilight seemed even more daunting.

Soon, nightfall began to engulf the landscape. Eventually, only a small portion of the dark road gleamed in the headlights of the bus. The day's tiredness began to overtake Nandy and he dozed off into a dreamless sleep.

Screeeeeeech! Nandy was roughly jolted out of his sleep. His head hit the glass partition of the driver's cabin with a bang. His eyes flew open. He found his heart racing and head spinning. After a few seconds, he managed to sit upright in his seat. He breathed deeply, rubbing his head. Why had the bus come to a stop so roughly? The driver was sitting frozen on his seat. He then turned and gave Nandy a pale apologetic smile. He was visibly shaken. Nandy watched him join his hands and mumble prayers to the little idol of Lord Hanuman kept at the centre of the dashboard.

It was absolutely dark outside. Nandy shadowed his eyes with his palms to peep out of the window. There was no visible light indicating human habitation. Electricity hadn't reached the remote villages yet. People used kerosene lamps, but on the mountains even the faint light was visible from far. Nandy spotted none. He checked the time by his watch. It was fifteen minutes to eight. He had barely slept for about twenty minutes. He got up to check with the driver why he had decided to stop the bus in this wilderness with such an incredible jolt.

The driver and the conductor were hurriedly jumping off the bus. Nandy followed suit. He found the conductor sitting on his haunches aiming light from a torch at the bus' belly, and the driver half under the bus. Why wasn't he inspecting the engine? Nandy frowned. The driver then straightened up and shook his head. Nandy's heart skipped a beat noting the disappointment on his face. All should be well with the bus. He had no intentions of spending the night out here, in these forsaken surroundings.

By and by the other passengers too got down from the bus, rubbing their

heads or shoulders. Nandy stroked his head where a big painful lump had begun to form.

"Sorry, Sahib," with his hands joined in an apology, the driver, Ram Prasad, directly addressed Nandy, confirming his worst fears. "We are in deep soup. The front axle has broken."

Nandy shook his head in frustration. "Oh hell! How? What happened?"

"Sahib, I hit that big boulder. I saw it only at the last minute." He pointed towards the direction they had just covered and Bheem Singh aimed the torchlight there. "As I negotiated this blind curve, there it lay in the middle of the road. Doesn't it seem that someone has planted it here, deliberately, with the intention to create trouble?" Frowns deepened on many foreheads. "And before I could apply brakes, the axle hit it and broke." With his arms limply hanging on the sides Ram Prasad stood resigned and helpless, looking from one person to another, seeking their support.

All eyes worryingly scrutinized the blind curve and then the large boulder. No one uttered a single word. Bheem Singh came to his partner's aid. "Sahib, Ram Prasad had the presence of mind to immediately steer the bus towards the mountainside before coming to a halt. If he had lost control, the bus would have rolled down the deep gorge." He folded his hands to thank the one who had saved them from such a fate. "Haré Ram, Haré Ram," he chanted a number of times.

The passengers looked at each other; perhaps someone would come up with a rescue plan. All eyes finally came to rest on Nandy. He was an engineer with the Public Works Department and hence important for those who used these underdeveloped roads on a daily basis. He was in authority to lessen their woes.

Nandy knew well that at this particular stretch the hillside was very weak. Frequently, big boulders rolled down and crashed on the road. The huge ones even tore down the road, and dashing down the gorge they plunged into the river with such a deafening explosion that it shook the earth. People could hear it even fifty miles away. He had surveyed quite a few such road damages in the past few months of his job. But, without his workforce, presently, he was as helpless as any one of them. So, he simply shrugged his shoulders.

Ram Prasad rubbed his stubble in frustration. "This area is a menace for the drivers. A number of times I have removed such huge blockages from the road with the help of the passengers. There have also been instances of vehicles getting directly hit by the rolling boulders." He looked at his passengers gathered around him. "Perhaps you know about the accident that took place just two months ago—a huge boulder crushed a jeep—all six passengers died on the spot." He shook his bowed head sadly and

simultaneously pointed at his bus. "This is a minor irritant."

Nandy stood still. He knew about the accident. The jeep belonged to his department. A senior officer was visiting from the head office for inspection. He too was to travel in the jeep that day, but had been taken ill with an intestinal infection. His junior had volunteered to go instead. It was a sad and unnerving accident, but he was thankful to God for his providential escape.

As of now, they were in serious trouble. He regretted not paying heed to his brother's advice. Had he caught an earlier bus, he wouldn't be stranded in this isolated place, in this dark night. It must have been a minor problem for the bus crew, for they were used to such adversities and were mentally prepared. For him this was a huge cause for distress. The thought of spending the whole night in these lonely jungles was worrisome. On top of this, his brother would be extremely anxious if he didn't reach on time. There was no way he could inform him now.

The night was getting colder. He shivered despite the woollen pullover he was wearing. He rubbed his hands to warm them and then folded his arms to cover his chest. "Ram Prasad, we need to remove the boulder from the road before some other vehicle hits it." There was an immediate reaction—all rushed to follow his advice. In the torchlight facilitated by Bheem Singh, they pushed the boulder down the ravine. It was only after a minute that they heard a booming splash from the dark depths.

Nandy borrowed Bheem Singh's torch and left the group gathered around the bus gazing at it, as if they were observing an antique relic in a museum. He walked across the road and peered in the dark as far as he could. Beyond the four metres broad road he faced a huge black chasm, the mountain receded out of his vision plunging into abrupt darkness and then rose again into another colossal, formidable, dark range on the far side. No lights, not even headlights of any vehicle were visible anywhere. The moon was yet to rise to relieve them of the near total darkness that engulfed them. He regarded the towering Himalayan Mountains—generally imposing, serene, and dignified. They appeared a terrifying army of hulks that had surrounded the poor hapless bus passengers and wanted to swallow them. The usually elegant deodar, fir, and chir pine trees seemed like uncountable black daunting trolls closing in on them. The surge of the river Sutlej reverberated thunderously in the entire surroundings like an outlandish battle cry. It all sent his heart pounding. He shivered and cursed his luck. Only today the bus had to break down! He shook his head and turned to regard the bus. It was stuck immobile, wedged against the mountain, a useless piece of metal now. The eerie silence was thankfully being broken by human voices and Nandy was suddenly grateful for the company. He rushed back to join the rest, who were

busy imparting their impractical opinions.

Nandy once again counted and confirmed the presence of eleven men, now stranded in the middle of nowhere. He must think of some way out of this predicament. He weighed all the possibilities in his mind and then asked Ram Prasad, "Is there a village nearby? We can walk to it to spend the night there."

Ram Prasad shook his head vigorously. "No, Sahib, there isn't any habitation for miles around us. Only about eight miles ahead, there's a small village of six-seven houses. But to reach that village on foot, it'll mean a walk of at least two hours, maybe more in this dark." He shrugged his shoulders and continued, "Anyway, Bheem and I can't leave the vehicle. We'll have to sleep inside till help arrives."

Nandy shook his head dejectedly. "What help?"

"Sahib, the bus that'll pass by in the morning will report our plight to the head office and they will send a tow vehicle. Till then nothing can be done."

After a disheartened silence Nandy asked disconsolately, "Nothing till tomorrow morning?"

"You have some chance of getting a lift if you wait here, next to our broken down bus, but not anywhere else on the road. A passing vehicle will possibly stop to check if we need help, but no driver will stop in the middle of the night anywhere in this wilderness, to give lift to strangers out of the blue."

Bheem Singh instantly supported his colleague. "Ram Prasad is right. This is the only solution—stay here and wait. Although expect only an occasional army truck or a convoy at this time. But that doesn't happen every day."

Nandy sighed and added, "Okay. If any vehicle passes by, be ready to stop it. We could hitch a ride to our destination or at least till Narkanda, and escape from the possibility of spending the night in this forsaken jungle." He threw a glance at the broken down bus resting against the mountain wall. There was barely enough space for another vehicle to pass by. Even a minor deviation could send the vehicle plunging down.

Shiv Ram, a fellow passenger who ran a small convenience store, spoke in a small voice, as if his statement might come true if he uttered it loudly. "What if no vehicle comes tonight?"

Ram Prasad raised his hands in a gesture of utter helplessness, "Resign to the fate and be prepared to spend the night in the bus. But I tell you—I am much relieved that I have you all with me tonight. That makes me very comfortable. A few months ago, during the peak winter season, our bus had got stranded one night due to a large landslide and except for the two of us, there was no one in the bus. Both of us had spent the entire night alone in these wilds, wide awake and singing *bhajans* ."

"And shivering in cold. It was a terrible night. Won't forget it for the rest of my life!" Bheem Singh clicked his tongue. "We even heard strange sounds . . . Something was there outside the bus, walking around . . . We shuddered in fright . . ."

"Animals? Himalayan bears?" Nandy's query was ignored on purpose. He covered up the silence. "And, if we do not get any help tonight, you'll be again sleeping in the bus, and we'll be singing bhajans with you," he chortled, which seemed incongruent.

"Sahib, praying and singing holy songs is a good idea, otherwise who can sleep in these isolated forests, especially in the dark? The animals are not the only ones who pose the risk." Ram Prasad gazed at Nandy, worried.

"Why? Are there robbers or dacoits in this area?" Nandy knew it was a silly question. Existence of dacoits in the remote area of Himachal was a suggestion akin to expecting blue whales jumping out of the river Sutlej. Crime among these simple, honest, hard-working *paharis* was almost unheard of.

Nandy noted a quick exchange of glances. Then Shiv Ram remarked, "Educated sahibs do not believe in all these things, better not begin discussing such matters now, and add fear to our plight. We aren't sitting gossiping around a fire inside our protected homes."

"What matters?" Nandy's curiosity had been provoked.

Bheem Singh replied in a hushed tone, "Sahib, we simple villagers have grown up with all kinds of beliefs in ghosts and *chudails*— the wandering spirits. The main reason for our anxiety is the accident about a year ago, somewhere around this area. It could have been the exact spot. Who knows? It is difficult to know in this dark. But this is not the right time to discuss it."

"Neither the right place," voiced Shiv Ram stridently.

Nandy was rather amused, and he laughed. "Don't worry. I am not afraid of ghosts for I really don't believe in them. Never met one. Go ahead, tell me about the accident." He halted and frowned. "Wait a minute. I think I heard about a terrible mishap that had occurred last year during the monsoons, before I came to Jeori. Are you talking about the bus full of passengers that fell down the deep gorge into the river?"

A creepy silence embraced them all. The whooshing waters of the Sutlej became more defined and menacing. Without adding a word, the passengers quickly began to board the bus, as if seeking shelter against some invisible danger. With dwindling spirit, Nandy watched them all disappear inside the bus. When Ram Prasad and Bheem Singh too chose to go back into the bus, Nandy threw a quick glance around and then followed them. He noticed that the passengers were no longer sitting on their original seats. When they had

begun the journey, each had laid claim to a double seat. But now they were all huddled together on a few front seats. Even the driver and the conductor had chosen to sit among them. Only his original seat behind the driver's lay vacant. Once Nandy was inside the bus, Bheem Singh hurriedly got up and shut the door. He bolted it and then checked it by giving it a hard shove. Satisfied, he returned to his seat.

With other passengers crowding around him, Nandy raised the topic of the fateful accident again. "Ram Prasad, you must have known the unfortunate driver of that bus?"

"Yes, Sahib. We both had joined the service about the same time. He was young, almost my age, not even forty. He left behind little children, the youngest not even a year old. It was a terrible accident, Sahib. Not a single survivor." Ram Prasad shook his head despairingly. "You see, Sahib, this stretch of about five kilometres has a whole lot of loose rocks." A weak smile appeared on his face. "Of course, who would know that better than yourself?"

"Hmm, true. I have inspected the road thoroughly. These big boulders are a real nuisance—come rolling down anytime, without warning. It gets worse during the rains. Nothing can be done— unless we build huge retaining walls. That will need a lot of money."

"Yes, Sahib. It was one of those exceptionally huge boulders that had become loose and came hurtling down. According to the eyewitnesses, the bus was tossed like a toy by that speeding boulder, and then both went tumbling down into the Sutlej. It was a terrible accident. The bus was washed down for another half a mile before a big rock in the middle of the river finally halted its flow. There was no chance for any survival; the river was in full spate." The listeners shook their heads sadly. A few joined their hands and chanted 'Ram, Ram,' 'Jai Bhole Nath,' 'Jai Ma Bhawani.'

Ram Prasad closed his eyes for a quick prayer before speaking barely above a whisper, eyeing the dark exteriors through the window, "And Sahib, since then people have heard spirits crying in this area at night. I think Bheem and I heard them that night, the night we were stranded. To add to the fears of, you may say, foolish people like us, two months ago a similar accident took place at almost the same site. That government jeep, you know—with its six occupants—crushed by a big boulder. All sahibs killed, and the driver too . . ."

"Really? The same spot?" Nandy's brows were furrowed.

"Yes, Sahib. And people said it was due to the vengeful spirits of those dead. Even the temple priest of our village agreed. So the drivers are wary of this section. I was, as usual, driving so cautiously, with prayers in my heart. I wonder how I missed the wretched rock. I really wonder . . ."

Nandy had never believed in ghosts and spirits. He might have liked

listening to ghost stories in his childhood, but later his mature mind perceived them as fabulous imagination of some overtly irrational minds. But at present the stark wilderness, the dark, cold night, haunting sound of the gushing river rising from the deep gorge, and the thought of some wandering spirits of the people who had had unnatural deaths in the area—it all sent shivers down his spine. Nevertheless, putting up a brave front, he rubbished the cause for fear. "I know such accidents are sad, especially for those who lose their relatives, but the spirits of the dead wandering—I really don't believe that." He persuasively shook his head.

"I told you Sahib wouldn't believe." Shiv Ram informed others as if he had unearthed a great scientific secret. "It is we simple people who fear the wandering souls of the dead." He got up from his seat and came to sit next to Nandy. "Sahib, we believe that when someone dies an unnatural death, the spirit does not achieve its salvation till it has completed the unfulfilled tasks of its life. For example, spirits of young virgin maids roam in search of mates."

"Living mates for the dead? How's that possible?" Nandy scoffed.

"It's true, Sahib. There was a time I too wouldn't have believed such tales." It was Desraj speaking. Sitting crossed-legged on his seat he had been quietly listening to the discussion till now. Well into his fifties, he ran a grocery shop in Jeori. "It was when my young son was troubled by such a spirit that I realized they actually exist." Shiv Ram nodded in support.

"Oh, really? Tell me about it." Nandy tried smiling cynically, yet appeared more like a curious child.

Desraj looked around, seeking approval. A few men squirmed on their seats in anticipation. Some threw quick glances at the dark windows in apprehension. No protests were raised—for who could deny oneself of the romance with fear? The ambience couldn't have been better.

Desraj folded his arms and cleared his throat. Others snuggled closer. Nandy stretched his legs in the aisle with careless defiance. "It happened last summer," Desraj looked at Nandy and finding him attentive, nodded approvingly. "Late one evening, my son, Ratan, was returning from a nearby village after spending the afternoon with his friend. It was well after sunset. Darkness was slowly creeping in. He was striding homeward, merrily singing. He has always been *mast,* a happy-go-lucky fellow, you know, and a good singer too. He was still a mile away from home when on that lonely stretch he stopped dead in his tracks, noticing a beautiful young girl sitting on a rock beside the footpath. My Ratan, barely seventeen, was enamoured by her beauty and stood gaping at her. She returned his stare with a luring smile. He stared at her stupefied—eh, silly boy, even though he had never seen her before. He smiled at her and then, at last realizing that it wasn't proper to

stare at a stranger thus, he walked on. The girl began following him."

"Ratan must have been thrilled at the attention?" Nandy threw up his head and laughed.

"Sahib, that's exactly the mistake he committed. Well knowing that a well-raised decent girl would never do that."

"Do what? She didn't do anything." Nandy raised his eyebrows, a sardonic smile playing on his lips.

Desraj frowned disapprovingly. "In the first place, she shouldn't have been out alone in a secluded place at that late hour. And then stare at an unknown young male? No, no . . . Our girls are taught modesty." He looked around at the others who nodded, supporting his statement. "My young boy's mind couldn't grasp that fact. Perhaps he wasn't thinking at all. He thought he was a dandy, on whom the beautiful young girl was granting her attention. He was delighted by her interest in him."

"Naturally!" Nandy grinned.

There were a few coughs, and some light laughter that peeved Desraj. "No, Sahib. First listen to the whole affair."

"Okay. Go ahead. I won't interrupt." Nandy raised his hands impishly.

Desraj took a deep breath and continued, "The girl continued to follow him. My boy, overjoyed by the attention, kept on turning, time and again, to look at her. She followed him around three or four curves, and then all of a sudden she disappeared. One moment she was behind him, next moment—there was nobody." Desraj stopped to check the impact of his account on the listeners. A nocturnal animal howled from somewhere close, all eyes brusquely shifted towards the door. The heartbeats increased. Desraj broke the silence. "Ratan looked around, even went back a few curves, searching to see where she had vanished. He didn't find anyone, not a soul. Finally, his tubelight switched on. He was frightened realizing he had probably seen a ghost, and hurried home. He didn't share this incident with anyone at home." A few men briefly glanced at the windows as if they expected someone there, furtively eavesdropping. The darkness outside had deepened.

Nandy waved his hand sceptically and broke the silence, "She must have been a young girl from a nearby village in love with your son. Might have hidden in a bush or—"

"No, Sahib. Have patience. I haven't finished yet," Desraj spoke fervidly. "A night or two later, after dinner, Ratan was in his room, engrossed in his studies—preparing for his matric exams. He felt a sudden cold around him—like being back in icy winters. He looked up from his book and there she was, standing in front of him. He looked at the window, thinking she had sneaked in through it. But it was shut. The door was shut too. How did she enter? As

he stifled his scream, the girl stretched her arms, inviting him. No village girl would behave in this manner. They are shy. Even my silly Ratan knew that."

Desraj paused and threw a discreet glance at Nandy. Nandy avoided him and turned to look out. Darkness and solitude stared back at him. A mild fear crept into him. "My boy was scared," Desraj brought him back to the narration. "Frightened out of his wits. How had she entered his room when the window and the door were bolted from inside? Who was she? At that moment he was sure that she wasn't a human. Before he could shout for help, she faded in front of his eyes—like mist evaporating in heat. My silly boy still remained tight-lipped. He should have at least let me know." Desraj let out a long sigh of despair. "Then, it became her ritual to visit Ratan every night. She wouldn't utter a word but only extend her arms, inviting him. Ratan would shrink into a ball and tremble. In the beginning she would not appear for more than a few minutes. She then began visiting him in his dreams too, touching him, hugging him. Were those dreams or was she there in reality when my son was half conscious, in a trance, I can't say. No other member in the house ever saw or heard her coming."

"So, you had no clue about what was happening to your son?" asked Nandy.

"No, Sahib, not a clue. I did notice that Ratan wasn't eating well, was getting thinner and unhealthy. He appeared listless and I got worried he had gotten ill. I took him to the village hakim. He went reluctantly. It was only after the hakim questioned him repeatedly that he broke down and told us about her. By then the spirit had become persistent. He told us that when in the middle of the previous night he had woken up, he had found her in his bed, lying next to him. He could see her but when he daringly extended his hand, he felt he had put his hand inside an icy mist."

"Ram, Ram! That must have been frightening." Ram Prasad shook visibly.

Desraj nodded. "Initially, we couldn't believe she existed and thought it was a juvenile mind's fantasy. Ratan continued to lose weight, from a healthy pudgy boy he became a bag of bones, became dark like charcoal. The change was alarming. He began roving around meaninglessly, stopped talking, stopped studying, had to be force-fed. His exams were approaching and I didn't know what to do. I made sure he was never alone, that somebody was constantly with him. But that didn't deter her. She began to visit many times in a day."

"So you also began to see her?"

"No, no. None of us saw her, but my son would become pale and begin to tremble. He would gaze in one direction, where she would be standing. We thought he was losing his mind, becoming crazy. We all were at a loss how to

help him. The hakim didn't have any cure either. Then we went to the temple priest. He listened to us, discussed things with my son alone, and then decided to arrange for exorcists."

"So the priest knew it was a ghost troubling him?" Nandy asked.

"Yes."

"Then?"

"They came, dressed in black, four exorcists. They looked daunting with their long, open, unkempt matted hair falling till their waists and their faces painted white and red. They carried brass tridents and some other stuff. They made a big bonfire and seated my son next to it. Raising their tridents high, the weapon of Lord Shiva, they began moving in circles around the fire and Ratan, chanting incessantly. Their steps kept on becoming faster and their chanting louder and intense. Every few seconds, they threw things in the fire, things that would drive away the spirit, I understood. The incantation continued for almost half an hour without any obvious effect. We began to get bored with the rituals. I thought it was all hocus-pocus; they were taking advantage of the situation and were out to cheat me. They had already taken a hefty amount from me before starting. So, I was getting angry and was about to ask them to stop the fuss and leave, and—you wouldn't believe, Sahib—a woman's screams burst forth all of a sudden from where Ratan was seated. Even those who wouldn't believe us before, and considered my son mad, heard those dreadful cries of an unseen being and became pale. Many began to tremble with fear. Then one of the exorcists began conversing with the unseen entity. We could hear some snuffling sounds for a while before all became quiet. I instantly noted some colour return to my son's face. We were then informed that the spirit had been evicted, sent to her realm, and it was a good riddance. The exorcists told us that it was a spirit of a young unmarried girl who had died an unnatural death, but was unaware that she was dead. And she claimed to be in love with my Ratan."

"Did you find out if it were true?" Nandy asked. "And whose spirit it was?"

"Yes. We unearthed that a few months ago a young girl from our neighbouring village had slipped off a cliff, hit her head on a rock, and died. And she was apparently a very beautiful girl. We concluded that it was her spirit—restless and wandering."

"Oh! Did it make any difference? I mean the exorcism?"

"Of course. Things became normal. She never appeared to Ratan again. He's a happy normal chap now. Has joined a college at Shimla. In fact, that's where I'm heading—to meet him. May God look after my boy, he's a good chap." He folded his hands and bowed to the God Hanuman's idol on the

dashboard. "So, you see, Sahib, some spirits do wander our realm, the ones that had unnatural deaths and therefore haven't attained peace. That's what we believe."

No one spoke for a while. The sound of heavy breathing filled the bus. Even Nandy was edgy. Desraj appeared a simple man, and not someone who would tell lies with the purpose of frightening others—Nandy concluded with unease. Desraj then looked defiantly at Nandy and said, "This was my personal experience, Sahib, not something I had heard from others. How can we not believe in the existence of the supernatural?"

"That is true. Many people undergo strange experiences with good or evil spirits." Ram Prasad nodded and then joined hands. "But right now, more we discuss this topic, more fearful we'll get. Please, let's discuss something less frightening."

"Pray to the almighty for our safety." Bheem Singh advised and then began to sing the Hanuman Chalisa. Others immediately joined him. Nandy didn't know the complete prayer but kept lisping along. The next half an hour was spent singing series of holy songs. That brought them some respite from fear —fear of the unknown. With that came the realization that they had completely forgotten about their need for food. It was much past dinnertime. Nandy had planned to grab a bite at Narkanda. It was his good fortune that there was enough food with his co-passengers and he didn't have to go hungry. Loud singing of bhajans continued after dinner, a persistent effort to keep fear at bay.

Nandy had kept his hearing faculties alert for the sounds overriding the interior din. To his dismay, not a single vehicle had come their way in the past two hours. Around ten, Bheem Singh checked all the windows and the door once again. He then made the declaration that it was time to sleep. "Keep prayers in your mind," he appealed before switching off the light. The sudden darkness was disconcerting. Outside, the landscape was washed in a faint silver light as the moon had made its appearance above a tall peak.

Nandy stretched on his seat but only half of his torso fitted on it. The rest of his lanky body hanged at various angles before his feet came to rest on the floor. It was the most uncomfortable sleep posture. The silence and the creaking seats, both were disturbing. He closed his eyes but knew sleep was a remote possibility tonight. Time and again he kept raising his neck to peep out, in hope of spotting some artificial light, but each time he confronted stark desolation. He had always considered himself a fearless man, but each passing minute tightened the knots in his stomach a bit more.

Minutes crept into an hour. He needed to relieve his bladder. Where was his courage? He was afraid to step out alone. The nocturnal predators like

leopards and bears that abounded the area were not the ones that made him nervous tonight. Was it a good idea to have allowed Desraj tell his frightening story?

At Wildflower Hall, Pa was a bundle of nerves. It was past eleven-thirty and there was no sign of Nandy. There was no way to check on him now. The deadly amalgamation of his anxiety and anger were reaching the peak. "It's typical of Nandy—this careless attitude. He has probably missed the bus, but wouldn't think of informing." Pa tried resting his anxiety. He had booked a trunk call but it hadn't come through either. There was no answer from the other side, he was told. Alarming thoughts were invading his mind one after the other. He was nervous but ordered all to retire for the night. Unable to sleep, he just sat on a chair in the drawing room, brooding, his forehead wrinkled in a deep frown. He knew the geology of the region well, knew of frequent landslides and sudden falling boulders. The road itself was not in good condition. All should be well with Nandy. He prayed. After a long wait, finally he went to his bedroom for a restless night.

However much Nandy tried to sleep, he just couldn't. The incident that had taken place around this area kept hovering in his mind like an obstinate fly. He raised his head to glance around. Except for Desraj, all had tightly wrapped their blankets around, and were restlessly shifting inside their makeshift cocoons. The driver and the conductor sat in the front cabin, chatting softly. Desraj sat cross-legged on his seat with eyes closed and was mumbling continually. Nandy was gratified that someone was trying to keep them safe through his ardent prayers.

He felt sad for the bus crew's tough job. He could well imagine their plight, how terrifying it must be, when they were often forced to spend nights like this, stranded in such lonely environs. Their act of bravery was taken for granted, whereas their courage and commitment called for accolades.

Without a blanket, Nandy was shivering in cold. He took out his jacket from his bag. Buttoning it up, he wrapped his muffler around his neck and once again activated his efforts to sleep. Then he almost fell off his seat hearing a sound he had been longing for. It was getting closer. At last! He sat up and looked around. All heads had popped up, listening to the blissful sound of an approaching vehicle. He shouted at everyone to get off the bus. Help had arrived. No way should they miss this chance. Jumping out of his seat, he ran to open the door even before Bheem Singh could emerge from the cabin. He shot out of the door and on to the road. Bheem Singh followed

him. One by one others scurried out like a nest of mice from a hole.

They could see the lights of a vehicle a few curves away. They must stop it at all cost. The conductor rushed to climb up the roof of the bus where bulky luggage was kept and threw down some sacks. Nandy and others arranged them on the road to form a barricade. They were not sure the vehicle would stop otherwise. The driver might get scared, taking them to be some wandering spirits, thanks to all the prevalent ghost stories in the area. Bheem Singh stood with the torch, shining it on their hurriedly constructed barricade. He wanted to make sure that the approaching vehicle did not miss it. That would be catastrophic for the owners of the sacks and perhaps for the vehicle.

They were wrong. The truck stopped as soon as the driver spotted the stranded bus and its passengers, even before spotting the barricade.

It was an army truck. The relief was immense. Smiles of respite brightened all the faces. There was immediate and brisk activity. Many ran to find hidden nooks to pee. Nandy smiled realizing the parallels in human nature. Each person then promptly picked up his luggage and one by one boarded the truck. The driver and the conductor too rushed to bring their stuff. They locked the bus and dashed back.

"You both are coming too?" Nandy asked, surprised. Weren't they recanting from their earlier statement?

"Yes, yes. We'll shift to Narkanda for the night," Bheem Singh said, flashing a gratifying grin.

Ram Prasad added, "We'll get back in the morning with the mechanics and get the bus repaired or towed, whatever . . ." and they both hastily hopped into the back of the truck where others were already merrily settled.

Nandy was given the honour of sitting in front, next to the driver. Thus, with loud heartfelt thanks offered to the Lord for helping them escape the trauma of spending the night in the lonely hinterland, the onward journey commenced.

Sandwiched between the driver and his helper, Nandy felt much relaxed. He checked the time. It was five minutes past twelve. *Bhai must have lodged the missing person report by now.* "So, you're headed for Shimla?" he asked the driver.

"Ji sir ji, to our cantonment in Jutogh."

"I need to go to a place much before Shimla. It's called Chharabra. Do you know it?"

"Yes, of course. But, there is nothing much there except a few famous buildings. The Retreat—where the VIPs stay in summers. I once drove the ADC to the Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, there. I was his driver before I was transferred. Then there is a famous building on top of the hill called Wildflower Hall," he announced proudly.

"Great, yaar. What luck! You know the place, Wildflower Hall. That's exactly where I need to go. My brother lives there. He's waiting for me. Must be worried sick by now. Perhaps he's on his way to the police station," Nandy declared with a laugh.

The driver smiled. "I don't think there's a police station close by, so do not worry." Then he added seriously, "We'll reach there pretty late."

"Do you often drive late at night?"

"Ji, very often."

"Hmm . . . What time do you expect to reach?

"Should be at my cantonment a little after three."

"And at Wildflower Hall?"

The driver did some quick calculations and declared, "By two, or perhaps a little after."

Nandy was not at all alarmed. He felt so blissful at this deliverance that he fell into a friendly chat with the driver. The turbaned Sikh replied to Nandy's query, "Sir ji, I am Narinder, Narinder Singh."

"What a coincidence, yaar!" Nandy gave a broad grin and patted Narinder Singh's shoulder. "Narinder comes to the rescue of Narendra." The young driver and his helper chuckled. "You know, Narinder Singh, if you hadn't come our way tonight, to our rescue, I wouldn't have slept a wink. All these people, travelling with me in the bus, tried their best to scare me to death. They told me such unbelievable tales of female ghosts seeking bachelor mates that for some time I was afraid I would be visited by one, being a bachelor myself. But I don't blame them. They are simple innocent people, and highly superstitious."

"I don't blame them either, Sir," Narinder Singh quickly glanced at Nandy and then focused his attention back on the road. "This area is such. For miles and miles around their villages there's nothing but wilderness. And it's an accident-prone area; there've been many accidents and untimely deaths. I take special care to drive very vigilantly here. In fact, only best of the army drivers get to drive on this highway, the Hindustan Tibet Road." He glanced sideways and smiled seeing Nandy nodding and looking at him admiringly. "As far as being superstitious is concerned, I am not very sure of that either. You wouldn't believe what happened with us last month, when we were driving through this wilderness one night."

"Don't tell me you too met a ghost!" Nandy's distressed cry was rather comical.

Narinder Singh smiled and then added gravely, "Yes, Sir. I even reported the incident to my superiors. We, in the army, are trained to be rough and tough, but that toughness is limited to dealing with other human beings. We

are not trained to deal with ghosts."

"You met a ghost? When? Where?" Nandy wanted to avoid this discussion, but his curiosity clouded his common sense. Moreover, his present seat between two robust young army chaps gave him a great sense of security.

"Sir, only last month I was driving through this stretch, though in the opposite direction, towards the Indo-China border. It must have been around one o'clock at night. We had crossed Rampur, and had barely driven for about fifteen minutes in this desolate country, where even a young man would think twice to venture out alone, when we were surprised to see a woman crossing the road all by herself. Her long loose hair was blowing as if in strong blasts of wind. But, Sir, there was hardly a breeze at that time. My window was open and I felt no draft. Her flimsy loose kameez too was similarly fluttering. Her sudden appearance startled me so much that I forgot to apply the brake. She didn't bother that a truck was heading straight towards her—might even crush her—and calmly continued to walk across the road, unmindful, not even a glance in our direction." Narinder Singh audibly blew out a puff of breath and then shook his head.

"Very strange," Nandy commented and peered through the truck's windshield. By now the half moon was high up, washing the landscape in its soft light, making it appear like a vast haunted land.

"And, Sir ji, she walked on, as if in a trance. I managed to brake just inches from her; otherwise she would have been under the wheels of my truck. My legs were shivering. I had just averted a mishap and saved my job, I thought. Ask Ashok. He was with me that night too. How he shrieked! Then we both sat stunned, staring at her."

Nandy turned to see Ashok's reaction. He was nodding his head convincingly.

Nandy applied his logic yet again. "Why Narinder Singh, she could possibly be a woman from this area, from a nearby village who had to be out at that hour to . . . perhaps contact a doctor."

"Contact a doctor in the forest, where not even a shack exists?" Narinder Singh brushed off Nandy's statement.

Ashok added mellifluously, "Doctors don't open their dispensaries in the jungles, in the middle of the night. Moreover, she was totally unaware of our truck heading straight at her. Completely unmindful."

Feeling a bit sheepish, Nandy scanned the lonely forsaken land. "Then?"

"I parked my truck on a side and called out to her, asking if she needed help. She paid me no heed, didn't even turn to acknowledge our presence. After crossing the road, she began to climb down the hill with ease—just like walking down the steps. Ashok and I jumped down our vehicle."

"I admire that. I wouldn't have dared!" Nandy whispered. He peered outside, as if he might confront her right then.

"I again called out to her, louder—'Can we help you, lady? Where are you going this late?' She didn't respond, as if she had neither seen nor heard us. She kept on climbing down the hillside, slowly, steadily, and then disappeared completely from our sight. I ran to peep down, to see where she was going. Meanwhile, Ashok fetched a torch and we peered down the hillside. There was no sign of her anywhere. Sir, you won't believe us. The hillside was a straight and steep wall, not possible to climb down the way she was doing, like climbing down the steps. The steep hillside ended directly into the Sutlej. There was no pathway, no habitation in that direction, nothing, nothing at all. And we realized that we had encountered something supernatural. She wasn't a living woman. We both were frightened out of our wits. Ashok began to shiver."

Ashok nodded. "Even confronting an enemy in a battlefield couldn't have frightened me more."

Narinder continued, "We both ran back to the truck and I raced my vehicle away from there. I still wonder about her. Sir ji, she wasn't a woman under a spell, or, or out for a tantric ritual. She was definitely a ghost. The way she disappeared . . ." Nandy wiped his brows and remained silent. There was no scope for contesting this soldier's statement. Narinder Singh went on, "We barely took a few seconds to reach the roadside to peep down after she went down there. The hill walls were barren and rocky, not covered with any trees or vegetation to obstruct our view. There was no place to hide. And, it was impossible to go down that straight wall, not without ropes and proper mountain climbing equipment."

Nandy nodded thoughtfully. He could envision the steep rock. It was impossible to walk down the way Narinder Singh was describing, even if the wall was inclined.

Nandy could feel Ashok shivering. "*Pukka* . She was a ghost," he whispered. Nandy glanced at the young man in the army uniform, who now sat with his eyes closed, muttering prayers. It was unnerving to see fright on the face of a strong army chap. Nandy felt a frisson of fear creep into him.

"You know, Sir ji, I have been avoiding driving at night since then. Never believed in ghosts till that day. But ever since . . ." He paused, gripping the steering wheel. "Today I had to travel at night due to some urgent deliveries. Orders are orders, can't refuse them. All the time I had prayers in my heart that we shouldn't have to experience the spooky spirit again." Nandy noted the army man's tensed facial muscles with trepidation. Narinder Singh shook his head. "Seeing all of you stranded in this desolate jungle I was glad that

Wahe Guru Ji had sent me to your rescue. I am also glad for the company. With all of you in my truck today, I am very comfortable."

"Didn't you mistake us for ghosts?" Nandy laughed and so did Narinder Singh.

"No, Sir, it was the broken-down bus that gave the surety that you all were not ghosts. Haven't heard of a ghost bus yet." He cackled.

Anybody alone in these forlorn surroundings could easily begin to imagine things, hallucinating as science explains, thought Nandy. But it shouldn't happen to strong soldiers, to the men trained to protect the nation. Their experience with a ghost woman was disturbing, but seemed genuine.

The truck's headlights were hacking through the darkness revealing a few metres of an intensely desolate road. Nandy's eyes penetrated through the surroundings, the visible and the obscure. Maybe, he might get to see a ghost too. It would be interesting to encounter one. With these two strong soldiers with him, and nine men huddled at the back, this was not a bad time for such an experience. Nandy smiled at his childish thoughts and chose to change the topic. "So tell me about your life in the army, Narinder Singh. Is it too hard?"

"Oh yes, Sir. We are made rough and tough through vigorous and strict routine. After all, we have to be ever ready to defend our borders."

"Ours is a new nation, barely nine years old. We are just trying to stand on our feet. Why would anyone want to invade us?"

"We are the beginners, that's exactly why. There could be sharks around, ready to swallow our lands, wanting to feed on our weaknesses."

They got engrossed in the discussion and soon they reached Rampur Bushahr. The town was a ghost town at this hour of the night. Not even a small teashop was open. The road was uphill from here all the way till Narkanda. The truck moved up slowly through the shadows of giant conifers and the speckled moonlight filtering through them. Animated discussions kept them alert and busy. They reached Narkanda where they stopped to drop Ram Prasad and Bheem Singh. After the thanks, goodbyes, and promises to meet again, the journey continued.

Sitting next to the driver, Nandy knew that he was supposed to keep awake for his sake. Although his eyes were heavy with sleep, he kept the conversation alive. They talked about their families, country's affairs, and the terrible massacre following the partition in 1947 that was so fresh on their minds. In northern India, everyone's close and distant families, directly or indirectly, seemed to have been affected by the horrific bloodbath. But they totally avoided discussing anything spooky again. Hours passed quickly for Nandy. They were still engrossed in an animated exchange when the truck halted once again in complete wilderness. Nandy looked at the driver

inquiringly.

"Your destination, Sir!" announced Narinder Singh.

Nandy looked around. There was nothing in the vicinity—apart from a dense coniferous forest there was absolute zilch. There weren't even any streetlights to indicate habitation. *Is this army driver playing a prank on me? He has been behaving absolutely normal but now he wants me to get off in the middle of nowhere—in this forest?* He looked at Narinder Singh with anxiety writ large on his face.

Narinder Singh nodded and pointed at a path ascending uphill, dimly visible in the light of the half moon. He was also quick to grasp Nandy's nervousness. Patting his back the driver consoled him, "The building you want to reach is just a few curves ahead. I have been there with my friends, though at daytime. Beautiful place. If you walk fast, which of course you will, you should be there in less than ten minutes."

Nandy had no choice but to trust the helpful man. He picked up his bag and hopped down. The other travellers at the back of the truck were blissfully sleeping. He heard their soft snores. Not wanting to disturb them, he extended his heartfelt thanks to Narinder Singh and Ashok. After the quick adieux, he watched the truck move further and further away from him. He stood watching with dismay the truck lights becoming dim and then totally disappearing down the road and around a curve.

Once the truck was gone, Nandy was engulfed by the dark, lonely night. He peered at his watch. He couldn't read the time—there wasn't enough light. He had kept his torch in the bag and didn't want to waste time opening it. He guessed it was around two—the time he had estimated. By now his eyes had adjusted to the dim light, which was enough for walking up the path.

He surveyed the deserted surroundings with unease. The path going up was metalled, broad enough for a small vehicle like a jeep to ply. This should be the place. His brother had mentioned it being lonely. Sighing deeply, he reminded himself that he was wasting time standing here and brooding. *What needs to be done must be done* .

With long strides he approached the path. A few monkeys, abruptly disturbed out of their sleep, rushed up the branches chattering noisily. They were clearly making an attempt to increase their distance from the ground. More abrupt fluttering movements up on a tree followed—high above, almost at the top. A flying squirrel screeched and took a sudden agitated flight, gliding down far into the dark valley. An owl hooted from inside a cluster of trees. Then the intense silence returned.

Though all the disturbances had made Nandy jumpy, the silence made him more nervous. He looked up at the tall deodar trees and smiled at his foolishness. The forest creatures were not used to having human company at

this odd hour of the night. He gradually brought his vision back to the path he was to tread, and then his heartbeat suddenly stopped. He stood rooted to the ground. Frozen. Paralysed.

A strange woman stood on the side of the path, staring at him. Faint moonlight fell on her face giving it a strange glow, like light passing through a transparent film. She looked stunning, almost out of this world. Nandy swallowed hard and gathered his wits. *Who's she? What's she doing here in the dead of the night? Who's she waiting for? Is she crazy? Is she a prostitute? Would she find customers here, in this wilderness?*

He tried his best to keep out the frightful question lingering at the back of his mind. He dismissed his fear by deciding that she was a local woman of the area. He looked around once again to locate some houses or hutments, but failed. He had an added and strong reason now to hurry to reach his destination. In long strides he passed by her. The moment he did that, he felt an icy cold draught hit his body, like the cold breath of a grave. The long night had slowed down his reaction and he passed by her without any further thought.

He began to climb the path. *I've ignored her completely. Good enough reason that she should return home.* After about ten steps he glanced back to check on her, out of curiosity. She was no longer standing at the side of the path. She was right behind—just a few steps away—following him. He hadn't even heard her footsteps. A sudden dread turned his feet heavy as if they were tied with iron chains. Terror gripped his heart.

To overcome his fear, he tried rationalizing. She was perhaps seeking company. Perhaps, she was coming back from an errand and had missed her bus. She was lonely and scared. Then his numbed senses began to awaken. From an errand at two o'clock at night? Was it normal for a woman to be out at this time—at the time when the bravest of males would be scared stiff to venture out in a lonely deserted jungle like this? His heart began to pound against his chest.

There was still no sign of any human dwelling. They were surrounded by nothing but a silent foreboding forest. Her presence didn't make sense. Nandy felt goosebumps on his arms. He needed to confirm if she was a woman—a human. He turned slightly to glance at her. Her loose hair blew as if in a gust. She was wearing a loose and long pale-coloured shirt. It fluttered. But, there wasn't enough breeze.

Loose hair and loose dress? Narinder Singh had mentioned exactly such an apparition. Nandy felt suffocated; he gasped to breathe. Was she the same ghost? Had she travelled with him in the truck? He was frantic with terror. He turned to glance at her again. His glance lingered, as if pulled by a magnet. In

that dim moonlight, she looked exquisite. And, her vision seemed directly rested on him. Why was she following him? And smiling?

Her nearness sent his legs trembling and heartbeat soaring. Her vision through what appeared two dark circles in the dim light pierced through him —as if she could read his mind, feed on his fear. He drew in a quick breath and quickly turned to look ahead. What kind of entity was she? Was she really a ghost? Nandy quivered at the thought.

He shook his head. He was being silly. Irrational. Weak. He shouldn't have allowed those superstitious people to influence him. Perhaps she was really a local woman and was thankful for his company. She might have been lost in these deserted lonely environs. Should he ask her?

Did he have the guts to speak to her?

Desraj's tale now raided his mind. The spirit of a dead virgin seeking a mate . . . He couldn't help turning again. She was smiling seductively at him. He mustn't look into her eyes. Desraj said that his son had made that mistake, had looked directly into the eyes of the ghost. He quickly turned his face and increased his pace on his shaky legs. He began to count steps and then the curves he had executed. After five curves at that fast pace he was gasping, thousands of needles pricked his dry throat. He looked over his shoulder. She was still there, maintaining the same distance—matching his pace. He had taken such long strides. How was she managing that?

No building was in sight yet. His agitation was making his head spin. He felt faint. *Om, Om, Om.* Was he on the right track? What if he had taken a wrong road? What if Narinder Singh was mistaken? What if this path led deeper into a forest? *Om, Om.* How long would she follow him? What did she want from him? The road seemed endless.

The breeze became stronger. The trees began to sway, so did the shadows cast by them. They looked chilling, as if the whole area was getting filled with wandering, moving spirits. They were slowly surrounding him, gagging him, trying to engulf him. He was a dead man. Would he be able to escape alive?

Such intense fear was new to Nandy. He began to run as fast as he possibly could on his shivering legs. He could hear the wheeze of his heavy panting. If it were a woman, she wouldn't be able to run like him uphill, he was sure. He was gasping. He had probably left her far behind. The thought gave him the courage to turn to look back again, to confirm and to stop for a brief rest. She was right behind him, calm and relaxed. She too paused, and stood waiting. She appeared least affected by the uphill run. There was no indication of her being breathless. *Is she breathing at all?* Spasms of shivers arose in his body. *What is she? A body? A shape taken by a field of past energy? A shadow of what she once was? What does she want? Why is she following me? Please God, save me.*

He turned and ran once again, wildly, continuously chanting Om in his head. The humble pathway passing through a serene forest had become wickedly treacherous. It was calculatingly leading him to his wreck, he believed. He was at the peak of his desperation, executing curve after curve, each curve leading him to another; his destination seemed far, the road never-ending. He was also frantic to shake her off. No matter how fast he ran, she effortlessly managed to maintain the same distance, as if she was being driven by some supernatural energy. What was she going to do? How would she harm him? Nandy was fraught with anxiety. Did this frail-looking thing have the power to exercise control over him?

He was now sounding like an engine. Sweat was pouring down his forehead and seeping into his eyes, burning them. He didn't bother to take out his handkerchief from his pocket. He was focused on how to shake off this unearthly shadow and remain alive. It was getting so harrowing.

He began to prepare mentally for any eventuality, for whatever was in store for him this night. He was losing hope of ever reaching his brother's house. Narinder Singh had dropped him at the wrong place, he was sure. He had told him that the house was just a few curves ahead, a few minutes away, and here he was treading curve after curve with no sign of the building or a house anywhere. Should he turn and head back towards the road? But this creepy woman was behind him, obstructing the path. Moreover, what would he do on a lonely road with no chance of getting a lift? He was ensnared, lost, at the mercy of this eerie woman.

Around the next turn, a large building suddenly loomed above him. Its appearance sent a wave of shock and relief at the same time, and made him stop in his tracks. He stood huffing and puffing. His chest was paining, his lungs almost bursting. The structure was much bigger than his expectations. It looked like a small castle from a fairy tale. A weak light bulb lit the veranda; otherwise the place was completely dark, deserted, and encased in dim moonlight.

The sight of the manmade structure was enough consolation. It was, in all probability, his deliverance. He had run really fast on the last leg. Could she still keep up with his pace? He looked back and was relieved to see no one was around. He heaved a sigh of relief. Being alone was so blissful. The solitude and darkness of the night were not as frightening.

He scrutinized the building carefully. It was quite a big structure. He reached the steps leading to the veranda and climbed up a few. Then he hesitated. This was probably the institute. Where was the residence of the principal? He conducted a quick survey of the surroundings and spotted a cottage, about forty to fifty metres to his right. A narrow footpath curving

around a small grassy hillock led to the cottage. Nandy retraced his steps and followed the path. He was exceptionally alert—his eyes scrutinizing his surroundings, ready for any danger well in advance. The woman seemed to have disappeared—gone. What a big relief! At last, he had shaken her off. After all, she was human and lived here somewhere and had gone to her house. He had been pointlessly unnerved. He shook his head at his stupidity. He could have asked her where she lived. His shaky legs were slowly becoming steady. In two minutes he reached the steps leading to the veranda of the cottage. He covered all the steps in one giant leap. A few more quick steps to cover the veranda and he reached the door. He dumped his bag down on the floor and knocked on the door. Nobody answered. Probably all were fast asleep. He banged louder, using both his fists. It remained absolutely quiet inside the cottage. Fear began to creep inside Nandy once again. There was something seriously wrong. It was then he saw an unusually big lock hanging on the door. He looked at the lock in dismay. Why didn't anyone live here?

He picked up his bag, turned to go back to the main building, and then froze. She stood right behind him, below the steps. Not a leaf stirred but her hair blew in gusts. Her piercing dark gaze was fixedly focused on him. An enticing smile played on her lips. He stood paralysed, his mouth agape, his heart racing once again. Were those eyes or just holes emitting terrifying energy? Though it was at the back of his mind, the reality hit him now. She was no human; she was a wandering ghost. But why was she after him? He felt a tight, painful knot in his stomach. And then he felt the stab, a hard jab on his chest. What was she doing to him? "OH GOD!" His first loud words appeared to hit the woman like some weapon and she staggered. An angry expression replaced her scornful smile. Her features became grotesque, the beauty instantly lost to malice. It was the weirdest, scariest vision. Nandy was shivering wildly. Gathering the last bit of his strength and holding his painful chest, he dashed towards the other side of the veranda, hopped down, hit an uneven ground, lost his balance, straightened and then in frantic long steps ran towards the main building without a glance behind to know if she was still tailing him.

To his reprieve, he could now see some more light. Someone was standing at the top of the steps with a lantern in hand, peering down at his desperately running figure. Before breathless Nandy could utter a word, the man shouted, "Who are you? Stop. Don't move further."

Nandy obeyed him. The man couldn't be displeased. He didn't want to be left alone with the eerie woman. He stood still, at attention, his body shuddering in spasms.

"Who are you? Why were you banging the door and creating ruckus at this hour?"

"I-I'm the principal's bro-brother. I got l-late . . . The b-bus, the bus I was travelling by broke down." Nandy's throat was dry, his voice shaky—he was finding it difficult to speak. He swallowed hard. "And, and who, who are y-you?"

"I am the night watchman, Jharku." The voice was stern and gruff. Then softening his tone, he asked, "Are you Narendra sahib? My Sahib was expecting you much earlier. He was worried . . ."

Ah, at last! Nandy tried to smile but failed, still shaken after his brush with the ghost. "My b-bus b-broke down. I, I got a lift, in, in an army truck and reached here with g-g-great d-di-difficulty."

Jharku raised his lamp to peer at his face closely. Sahib's Brother? Then, why was he so nervous? And sweating? Nandy could perceive a friendly face, which then suddenly turned grave. "I-I am s-speaking the, the truth." But Jharku was not looking at him. His eyes were fixed on something behind him.

Nandy instinctively turned to look back. The white spectre was moving, no, floating back slowly, away from them, towards the cottage. He looked back at Jharku and noticed the large wooden stick in his hand raised, ready for use. The sight of the simple weapon was of much consolation to Nandy, as was the reassuring presence of the night watchman. He took a few steps towards Jharku, to be closer to a human.

"There's someone with you?" Jharku sounded amazed.

"D-Don't look at her."

"Her? But Sahib said you aren't married." He was evidently outraged.

"N-No, not a human."

"Gh-Ghost?" Jharku's eyes expanded in fear. He raised his lantern high. "She's gone," he whispered. After a stretched silence broken only by sounds of their breathing, Jharku lowered his lantern and loudly blew out his breath. "Who else could be out in the middle of the night?" He then brought his lantern in level with Nandy's face, intently scrutinizing him. Suspiciously. Nervously.

"I d-don't know, but . . . but she followed me right from down, from, from the, the entrance, the g-gate."

"Haré Ram, Haré Ram . . . Jai Hanuman . . ." Jharku chanted loudly.

"Let me in. I am s-scared and tired." There was desperation in Nandy's voice.

Jharku had begun to appear uncertain. "You wait here. I will contact Sahib and get his permission. I cannot allow just anybody into the residence, not at this hour."

Nandy protested, "I am his b-brother. He is expecting me."

"Not this late," Jharku stated firmly and turned to go.

Nandy frantically followed him to the door which Jharku blocked.

"L-Leave the lantern with me. I don't like the darkness. And your lathi too, please," Nandy pleaded.

Jharku considered for a moment, hesitated, then finally handed Nandy the lantern. He kept his weapon with him. He wasn't sure he could trust any outsider now, not after what he had seen. She definitely looked more like a ghost than a living being. He then quickly took out a bunch of keys from his pocket, unlocked the door and disappeared inside the building, closing the door behind him. Nandy heard the click of the door being locked from inside.

While Jharku was away to inform the boss of the arrival of a stranger claiming to be his brother, Nandy was about to have a nervous breakdown. Why was the ghost after him? What did she want? *Please God, save me now, for once. Keep this horrible entity away.* He raised the kerosene lantern towards where the ghost was last seen, hoping the hot burning fire would keep her away. But he refused to even glance in that direction. He waited on his trembling legs facing the door and reciting Hanuman Chalisa in his shivering voice—*Bhut pisach nikat nahi aave, Mahavir jab nam sunave* —Ghosts and djinns dare not come near, when you recite the name of God Hanuman.

Why was the night watchman taking hours to return, or would he return? Why didn't the ghost woman bother this man? He stayed out throughout the night, didn't he? Or, was he a ghost too? What if it's a ghosts' castle? Would he be allowed to live? Or was he already a dead man? A ghost? *"Jai Hanuman gyan gun sagar . . ."*

The door suddenly opened wide to the smiling countenance of his brother. Jharku retrieved the lantern from Nandy's hands as he fell into his brother's open arms with a cry of relief. His brother chided him, "At last, Nandy! Didn't I tell you to board an early bus? But you just wouldn't—" His brother stopped midway. What was wrong with Nandy? Why was he trembling, and sobbing like a child?

Jharku stood guard behind them with his kerosene lantern raised and his lathi ready for defence. He was peering into the dark void of the night, mumbling prayers. But he was unsure if any of those things would work on the ghostly entity he had just seen.

THE UNFINISHED PARTY

After spending ten days with his brother and his family—brooding, reflecting, unwinding, avowing never to venture out on a journey after sundown, Nandy caught an early morning bus and returned to Jeori a changed man. He was now a staunch believer that death is only an end to a body, not the spirit. A copy of the holy Bhagavad Gita, the ancient Hindu scripture that conveys the philosophy of indestructibility of spirit, was now his cherished treasure. In fact, it still is. The last time I saw him a few years ago, the same old copy of Bhagavad Gita was prominently lying on his bedside table.

"It was providential that watchman Jharku was on duty at the time I was being chased by the spooky entity." Uncle Nandy recalled the incident that was still so fresh in his mind even after years had gone by. "I had lost all hope of escaping alive that night. You know the sight of a lathi-wielding man holding a kerosene lantern became a symbol of trust and security for me ever since." He smiled and shook his head.

Way back then, Nandy had posed a question one evening during his stay at Wildflower Hall. "Bhai, do you think that ghostly woman could have caused me serious harm? Like, could it have possessed my body or, or sucked out my soul?"

Pa had frowned and then chuckled. "Come on, Nandy! She might not be a ghost at all! I think she was after you because she found you very attractive, a suitable bachelor! You better get married quickly, before you get killed by the young women running after you."

Nandy had paled, recalling Desraj's story. Bhai was joking, but how close to truth he was! "It was a ghost, Bhai ji, I'm sure," he insisted. "And, I also

believe that she travelled with me in the truck. She followed me right from where the bus had broken down." *The ghost must have been outside the broken-down bus all the time, hovering, waiting for the opportunity, or was she with us inside the bus?* Nandy had wondered.

His brother had frowned. "Nandy, be reasonable. Your imagination is running wild. Did you see her boarding the truck, eh?"

"No, but ghosts can manifest all of a sudden and then disappear equally fast."

"These are all old wives' tales. I am not going to buy your ghost story."

"But Jharku also saw her."

"I wonder if she was really a ghost. She could have been a disoriented woman who had lost her way."

"No, Bhai, believe me, she was not a human. I saw her . . ." Nandy persisted.

"People can be mistaken in the dark of the night, especially when they are also panicky. Anyhow, forget it now. Pray that God saves you from such eccentric women." And his brother chose to change the topic.

Nandy realized that it was not possible for the sceptics like his brother to believe in the supernatural. He was no different himself, till he had had the direct encounter. And since Jharku too had a fleeting glimpse of the ghost, he was also the only one who believed him. He was grateful to him for being his redeemer that night. All through his stay at Wildflower Hall, he had time and again let Jharku know how thankful he was. That had pleased Jharku to no end.

Jharku would have also boasted about the whole incident had his boss not strictly warned him against revealing it to anyone. As the principal of the institute, Pa strictly wanted to avoid rumours floating in the campus. "Don't go around blabbering about the incident to anyone, Jharku," Pa had stridently instructed him. "No spreading of tales about what you and Nandy saw the other night."

"No, Sahib, I won't. My mouth is sealed," he had assured, and had kept his promise.

Time passed. Monsoons arrived and departed. The snow in winters covered the landscape in a desolate white, keeping people indoors and fires burning in the hearths. Cool summers sluggishly began to replace the cold wet spring of the mountains. The wheel of seasons continued rolling, and with it day-to-day mundane affairs of life. The supernatural occurrence was more or less forgotten. But the fear of the close presence of restless souls remained for some in the recesses of their minds, which forbade them from even

mentioning them.

At the end of April 1957, Pa received his promotion and transfer orders. He was to join the head office at Shimla. His post at Wildflower Hall was to be filled by Mr. Kulkarni, who was coming from Delhi to take over as the new principal. We were to move out of Wildflower Hall and head for Shimla once Pa had personally handed over the charge to Mr. Kulkarni.

Pa got busy winding up his work at the institute and Ma got busy packing up. Since the east wing of the main building was still occupied by us, Pa decided to temporarily arrange for the new principal's stay at the cottage.

The cottage was situated about fifty metres southeast of the main building, bordering a dark coniferous forest. A downhill incline hidden under a bounty of firs and cedars began right from the rear end of the cottage.

It was a snug unit of a large sitting room, two comfortable bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bath. A well-kept garden in front imparted it a quaint picture of a typical English house. During the erstwhile rule of the British, this cottage seemed to have accommodated the manager of the hotel.

Its isolation was ominous. In the beginning of his tenure, Pa had offered it to the vice principal but he had barely stayed there for two days, at the end of which he requested to be lodged in the main building. "I'm single and need only a small unit to stay," he justified.

Even using the cottage on a shared basis was not acceptable to anyone. Why no one wanted to stay in the cottage, Pa never gave it much thought, for he had no clue that rumours were rife in the school about a mysterious presence in the cottage.

Consequently, the cottage got reserved for special guests of the institute. It was opened once in a while for cleaning, but mostly remained vacant and locked.

Now the cottage was opened after months for a thorough cleaning, to make it liveable for the new principal and his wife. Ballabh, a young boy in his late teens who had joined the staff only two months ago, was assigned the duty.

Equipped with cleansers, brooms, mops, and dusters, Ballabh opened the lock and entered the cottage around nine in the morning. The house was icy cold and oddly dissuading.

The moment he started his work, he began to hear strange whispers. Was the broom he was using making funny sounds? He stopped, stood still, but the whispers persisted. He realized that the voices were coming from behind him. He looked around wondering who else was in the cottage. Had someone sneaked in as he had left the door ajar for fresh air? He inspected the rooms

but found no one. He resumed his work ignoring the murmurs. But they were getting louder. The sounds kept following him. He shivered inside his warm clothing.

After sweeping the floors he sat on a chair to rest. The murmurs were draining him. He pressed and released his ears a number of times to stop the buzzing. Slowly the sounds subsided. Perhaps he needed to see a doctor.

After resting for five minutes, he got up to resume his work. The whispers immediately returned. He tried ignoring the strange voices. But they were getting stronger. Then he heard the first clear words—get out. He looked around. Perhaps the voice had leaked in through the window, though he couldn't spot anyone outside. Shaking his head, he walked into the bedroom and picked up the bedcover to change the bed linen. It was then that he felt a strong shove. He held onto the side table. "Get out." The angry growling voice was near and distinct. Someone seemed to be standing right next to him. Totally invisible. He stood frozen, looking around the stark empty room. Then he watched in horror as the pillow from the bed rose on its own and came hurtling towards him. He dodged, and then panting, trembling, screaming, gasping, he rushed out of the cottage and straight into the principal's office.

Pa patiently listened to Ballabh's report. His shivering body and pale face were proof enough that he had actually experienced something that had intensely scared him. But pillows hurtling through the air—on their own? The boy had surely a fabulous imagination. Nevertheless, for a moment Pa got worried. Were there really supernatural activities happening around? First Nandy, and now Ballabh? But he shook this thought out of his mind. The boy was exaggerating. He was barely eighteen, and immature.

He summoned Bishnu, in charge of the maintenance, and asked him to stay with Ballabh till he finished his work. Ballabh refused outright. Nothing could pursue him to return to the cottage. The experience had unnerved Ballabh so intensely that he asked to be relieved from his job. He would go home and later seek a job elsewhere. "This place is spooky, Sir, not safe," he declared. Pa rubbished the whole episode as fictitious fear of a weak-minded juvenile, and allowed him to leave.

Bishnu was equally hesitant to enter the cottage. He had heard that the paranormal activity around the cottage had increased lately. But he couldn't decline the orders. He collected a team of a few bravehearts, including Jharku. They first scouted the cottage, loudly chanting prayers. The cottage had never felt that cold. They also felt an unexplained presence, as if someone was keenly watching them, following them, yet keeping distance. Perhaps prayers were working. Cleaning the cottage hurriedly they locked it once again.

Two days before my family was to depart for Shimla, Mr. and Mrs. Kulkarni arrived a little before lunchtime. The sky was partly cloudy and the balmy sunshine repressed the feel of the approaching summers. But for the couple, having come from the summer heat of Delhi, it was almost like experiencing winters again.

The Kulkarnis were in their late thirties and childless. The excitement of being posted at a famous building sitting in the lap of the Himalayas was writ large on their faces. The institute's staff and students had gathered to extend them a hearty welcome. "This is our first time on the mountains, and we're going to love it here," Mr. Kulkarni announced heartily and his wife nodded enthusiastically, wrapping her shawl around her. They both seemed like school children going for a picnic, their thrill at the prospect of living in such heavenly surroundings exuded from their very mannerism. A few staff members exchanged glances. Some shook their heads in pity. Jharku and Bishnu, standing at the back of the group, bowed their heads and said silent prayers.

After the initial welcome, introductions, and hot cups of tea, the couple settled in the cottage. "What a lovely little joint," Mrs. Kulkarni remarked, plonking herself on the sitting-room sofa.

"Except it's exceptionally cold in here," Mr. Kulkarni added, rubbing his hands to warm them.

"I know, I felt it as soon as I entered. I have asked the caretaker to keep the heaters on."

After freshening up the couple joined my parents for lunch. Mrs. Kulkarni, happy and excited, twittered throughout. Afterwards they were taken to the garden for a relaxed cup of coffee.

Mrs. Kulkarni looked around in awe at the emerald grass and the exotic flowers in the beds, which had just begun to bloom. She seemed impressed and expressed her excitement to my mother. "Mrs. Sharma, I don't mind living here for the rest of my life. This place is heavenly, just out of the world. Aren't you sad you're leaving?"

"We've always lived in similar places, Mrs. Kulkarni. We belong to the mountains. And we aren't going far, just about twenty kilometres away."

"You are so lucky!" Mrs. Kulkarni chirped.

Pa interrupted their conversation to suggest that Kulkarnis should shift to the main building after our departure. But Mrs. Kulkarni was too happy with the charming cottage. "Why do we need a large accommodation? We don't have children. The cottage is big enough for the two of us, and quite comfortable. I'll enjoy my privacy and peace there."

"Absolutely, your choice." Pa shrugged his shoulders. "But, may I warn you, it can get lonely at times." He was anxious for their well-being after the recent incidents, even as he pretended to be a sceptic.

But Mrs. Kulkarni rubbished his proposal. "I have suffered enough noise of the crowded cities. Now I want to enjoy peace of this isolated cottage." She cheerfully stretched her legs and added, "I'm thoroughly going to enjoy the tranquillity of this stunning mountain resort. Did you say it was once a luxury hotel, during the British era?" Mr. Kulkarni watched his wife devotedly. He was clearly pleased at her being so happy.

After lunch, Pa and Mr. Kulkarni left for the office. Ma advised Mrs. Kulkarni to rest for the afternoon. She needed it after the long journey. But, the novelty of the place had given the lady extra agility. She spent the entire afternoon inspecting the gardens, the surrounding areas, and basking in the sun. It was only late in the evening that she entered the cottage.

By now, darkness had begun to creep in as softly as a prowling predator, waning Mrs. Kulkarni's zeal. The calls of the nocturnal creatures caused further dismay. She was a typical city bred who had only seen crowds and clamour. The hush of the forlorn mountain dampened her spirit. On top of this, she had begun to hear strange whispers. Were there people outside, students or staff, talking in hushed voices? But the sounds seemed to be coming from inside the cottage. She quickly took out Lord Krishna's idol from her bag, selected a prayer corner and sat down for her evening puja, earnestly waiting for her husband's return.

When the couple joined my family for dinner, her concern was quite apparent. "Don't you ever feel scared living in this forsaken place?"

Her paradoxical statement amused Ma. "Don't worry, you will soon get used to it."

After dinner the couple retired to the cottage as the long journey and the hectic activities of the day had worn them out. They went to bed around ten and the long day's tiredness immediately overtook their conscious minds. Sometime at midnight Mrs. Kulkarni woke up with a jolt. Something had woken her up from her deep sleep. She couldn't be sure of what it was. There was absolute stillness around now. The only sound she could hear was coming through the window—of rustling of leaves in a mild breeze. She had never in her entire life experienced such intense silence where one could even hear the sound of a soft breeze. Though she had a hunch that it was a louder sound that had woken her up. Someone had spoken to her, almost into her ears. An angry voice. Maybe it was a dream.

Her husband suddenly muttered in his sleep. He then began thrashing his arms around, trying to lash out at something. That was strange. In their

married life of fourteen years he had never done that. She sat up, alarmed. "Honey, what's wrong?" she asked tenderly but then he calmed down. He was probably very tired and anxious about his new job. Dismissing her anxiety as needless, and not wanting to disturb him, she softly got out of her bed to go to the bathroom. She switched on a small torch that she had kept on the bedside table. As she neared the bathroom door, she felt something brush past her. Distinctly. Someone had been in her way and as she had approached the bathroom door, it had moved to a side to let her pass. In the torchlight she tried to pry around. Perhaps a cat had got inside the cottage. Wondering at the strange sensation, she went to use the toilet. She was still inside when she heard her husband's annoyed voice telling someone not to trouble him. Who was he speaking to? She hurried back. This time she decided to switch on the table lamp. Mr. Kulkarni was wide awake. He chided her for pulling at his blanket and now switching on the lights. "What's wrong with you? I'm tired. I have plenty of work to do in the morning," he grumbled. She opened her mouth to explain but he persisted, "I deserve to be allowed some decent sleep." He then pulled the blanket exasperatedly over his face and turned his back towards her.

Mrs. Kulkarni was surprised at this unjustified ticking-off. She hadn't even ventured near his bed. Annoyed, she switched off the light and slipped into her bed. The moment the cold darkness returned to the room, she distinctly heard some faint sounds. There was someone, something in the cottage. Could be a cat, she reiterated her thought. But why would it pull at her husband's blanket? She couldn't sleep anymore. The penetrating silence began to get on her nerves. Perhaps accepting this posting at such an isolated place was not a good idea. But then they had no idea it would be so desolate, she mused in the deathly silence of the night. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Creeeeaak! The bathroom door groaned at the hinges. Her eyes flew wide open. Her heart jumped against her ribs. She had shut the door just a few minutes ago. She turned to check on her husband. Still with his back towards her, he was packed in his blanket and blissfully asleep. Then who had opened the bathroom door? She turned her head towards the door. Her heartbeat stopped. It was wide open now. Someone was standing there, facing her. Faint moonlight seeping through the curtains of the room revealed a flimsy womanish figure in a flowing dress. "Gh . . . gh . . . gh . . ." but no more sound would emerge from her throat. She began to shake frenziedly. Was she dreaming? She shut and opened her eyes. The spectre was gone. She had perceived two frightful eyes, two dark holes staring at her, chilling her to her bones. But now a black hollowness inside a rectangular frame of the open

door stared back at her. *Who was she? Did I really see someone? Or was it just my imagination? My God, I'm going mad in this isolation.*

Then sounds from outside began to trickle in—faint and feeble. They were sounds of the tables being laid, and some distant voices. She heard clinking of glasses followed by more sounds in unison, like some toast being offered. There were more indistinct noises, and after that, the next sound was absolutely clear. Someone said, "Berra, chai *lao.* " A woman's voice followed, "Berra, *idhhar aao* ." Sound of faint laughter could be heard now. The voices had a distinct British accent. *Perhaps these two people are closest to the cottage.* Nevertheless, the sounds were soothing to her ears. At least there was some human company. She could now hear waltz music in the distance. Then she heard a male voice, "Daphne, dance with me."

Her mind began to work in a different direction. She was sure that some party was going on, from which she and her husband had been excluded. That upset her. When she was at dinner, no one had mentioned a late night party to be held here. Not even a hint.

Who were these people? She had spent almost the entire day here and hadn't seen any foreigners. She couldn't contain herself and voiced her opinion loudly to her husband and woke him up again. "Dear, there's a party going on outside."

"I know. I hear them. Perhaps the visitors arrived late," Mr. Kulkarni responded sleepily. "Please, sleep and let me sleep, dear."

Mrs. Kulkarni considered her husband's opinion for a while and to her it seemed a likely explanation for the late night party. This was also a matter of worry. Her husband and she were modest people, not at all the party-going types, had never touched alcohol in their lives. *This place still seems under the British influence, though most of the British left the country ten years ago. Maybe, some still live here, around this place.* She lay in her bed wide awake, reflecting.

Lost in these thoughts, she began to drift into sleep. The sounds continued for a while, she had no idea for how long, and then slowly began to fade. Mrs. Kulkarni finally fell into a deep rested sleep.

Next morning was unlike the previous one. Cobalt sky and cheerful sunshine welcomed the residents. Kulkarnis were up early, tired and drained. The cottage didn't appear as cheerful as it had the previous day. There was an eerie sadness floating and filling the space. After the morning chores and the puja, the couple headed towards the main building. They wanted to eat their breakfast in the hostel mess for they did not want to burden my mother. But Ma insisted that they should lunch with them, and they humbly accepted her invitation.

After breakfast Mr. Kulkarni joined Pa in the office. Mrs. Kulkarni did not go back to the cottage. Her sixth sense was dissuading her from being there alone. The spectre that she had seen momentarily last night was still unnerving her. Though she was still confused whether it was real or just her misgiving. So she whiled away her morning by strolling in the terraced gardens around the main building.

Ma had been very busy since the morning as we were to leave for our new destination the next day. She had once peeped through the window and had seen Mrs. Kulkarni sitting alone in the garden, looking lost. Since her packing was more or less over, Ma walked down to spend some time with the lady. She also arranged for two cups of tea to be sent to them.

Mrs. Kulkarni was too happy to have company. The ladies fell into normal chit-chat about their families. Tea arrived. Mrs. Kulkarni took a sip of the hot beverage and then kept the cup on the table. She hesitated and then raised the topic of the late night party to which she hadn't been invited. "How was last night's party, Mrs. Sharma? Is it customary to give late night parties here?"

"No! What party are you talking about?" Ma stared at her, puzzled.

"Perhaps the students had had a party last night . . ."

Ma frowned and shook her head. She had been staying here for over a year and had no knowledge about any such activity having taken place the previous night, or for that matter on any other night, at least not since she had been here. "Mrs. Kulkarni, there has never been any late night parties within the premises of this institute. My husband is not the type to arrange, or even allow such parties." Seeing a mystified expression on her face Ma continued, "Wildflower Hall was a hotel once, when British ruled over us. They used to have parties here, enjoying life at the expense of us native Indians. But that's all over now." Mrs. Kulkarni had gone pale. She even shivered beneath her jumper and shawl. Ma continued, "Though we do have formal get-togethers to celebrate festivals—Holi, Diwali, or evening high-teas for the guests once in a while, nothing more than that. Never. Yesterday night there wasn't any party—neither at evening, nor at night." Ma settled Mrs. Kulkarni's doubt with finality and took a few sips of tea.

Mrs. Kulkarni stared at Ma with anxiety bordering on fear. Ma was unable to understand what was the matter with her. Was she somewhat crazy? There was complete silence for a while. Ma noted her wiping beads of sweat that had collected on her temples and wondered why she was so worked up. "The staff and students have arranged for a farewell party for us in the evening, and of course you both will be our special guests." Ma tried cheering her up.

That didn't help in easing Mrs. Kulkarni's anxiety. Ma watched her looking around dazed, her eyes wide with fright. Then her eyes came to rest on the

huge oak tree growing close to the bedroom window of the cottage. It was a massive tree, had presumably been there for centuries. She turned back to Ma. "Mrs. Sharma, there was definitely a party yesterday night," she asserted rather fervidly now. "There were lots of sounds of—clattering of crockery, clinking of glasses, and foreigners calling out to waiters to serve them. 'Berra, chai lao.' I, I very clearly heard someone ordering. There was also music and dance, and, and there was also a woman called Daphne. I, I clearly heard this all happening last night. There is no question of being confused."

It was Ma's turn to stare at Mrs. Kulkarni. Dumbfounded. What was she blabbering about? Party outside, in the middle of the night, and English people? "Where do you think the party was held?" Ma asked her softly, now obviously a little anxious.

She once again regarded the old oak tree, her eyes narrowed. She appeared confused and distressed. Turning towards the building, as if trying to make up her mind, she finally concluded, "It was somewhere around that large tree, that one—close to the cottage's bedroom window. But then, why would anyone have a party outside the cottage, that doesn't make sense." She turned towards Ma with solid conviction, "It must be outside the main building then."

Ma was getting irritated at her persistence. "Mrs. Kulkarni, just think, who would arrange for a party in the lawns on a cold night? Wouldn't it be practical to have an indoor party? We have a big and delightful dining hall for this purpose. It was once meant for ballroom dancing, for the British." She added with vehemence, "Besides, do you see any signs of any party here, or near that tree?" The lady was stumped. "Mrs. Kulkarni, your tea has gone cold. Let me go and order a fresh cup of tea for you."

"No, please no. Don't go," she pleaded and shivered. "I . . . I even saw a woman in the cottage in the middle of the night. She stood at the bathroom door . . . And then was gone . . ." Her voice trailed away. She anxiously looked at Ma to see her reaction.

Ma gasped and then decided there was no point discussing such things. She felt pity for the lady who was clearly delusional. It was all a figment of her imagination, though, Nandy's spooky experience too hovered at the back of Ma's mind. She then changed the topic. "Make sure you have enough warm clothes, Mrs. Kulkarni, thick overcoats and woollen scarves. Winters here are quite severe." Not receiving any response, she continued, "We can meet in Shimla one day and I can help you shop for the winter essentials." Mrs. Kulkarni nodded mildly. "But summers are beautiful here," putting her empty teacup on the table Ma declared, "and in this season, you'll also find Gucchis growing on the slopes. They are the most expensive mushrooms, you know,

as costly as silver," she laughed to ease the tension, but realized that Mrs. Kulkarni wasn't listening. She was continuously and anxiously surveying the surroundings. After spending half an hour with her, when Ma left to go back to her work, the lady was staring at the old oak—utterly confounded.

An hour later, when they were together for lunch, Mrs. Kulkarni once again broached the subject of the previous night's party. Mr. Kulkarni seconded her report of the events. Although he had been very tired and sleepy, a few things had disturbed him. "Firstly, it was my wife stroking my face, and waking me up from my deep sleep. As if we are on a honeymoon," he guffawed. "And then she kept tugging at my blanket." He turned to smile at his wife. "What had come upon you last night, honey? You never ever did that before, not even when we were newly married."

His wife stared at him blankly, baffled and scared, and embarrassed at his flagrant claims. "What are you saying, dear? I never touched you or your blanket last night. I didn't even come near your bed, not even once." She then drew in her breath. The night scene played on her mind yet again—the apparition of a woman at the bathroom door, staring at her. There was a third unknown presence in the room, she was sure now. Though she had had a vision of a spectre in her room, she now assumed that talking about it might fetch her ridicule. Except for Ma, nobody understood why she suddenly looked terribly startled.

Mr. Kulkarni frowned at her reaction, but then went on, "And then there was that party going on next to the cottage. People talking and other sounds . . ."

It was Pa's turn to be surprised. He had no information about any party having been held last night. And, within the premises of the institute, without his knowledge? He proceeded with immediate investigations. Who would be a better person to begin the inquiry with than the night guard, Jharku?

Jharku made a spontaneous appearance. At Pa's question regarding the party he did not appear baffled. Though his deepening scowl revealed his worry. "There was no party, Sahib. What Sahib heard must have been the usual mysterious sounds."

"What mysterious sounds?" Pa looked mystified. But he was not buying Jharku's explanation hands down. "Mr. and Mrs. Kulkarni heard sounds of a party going on outside. Who was holding the party?" he repeated, demanding an immediate explanation.

"No one, Sahib," Jharku insisted and then turned towards Mr. Kulkarni. "Sahib, can you tell where the sounds seemed to be coming from? Were they coming from close to the large oak tree growing outside the cottage?"

Mr. Kulkarni didn't answer. He was apparently unsure. Mrs. Kulkarni seemed relieved. She smiled and nodded promptly and vigorously. "A few sounds came from close to the large tree next to our bedroom window. Others were distant." Then she looked at Ma triumphantly. "I told you so Mrs. Sharma, didn't I?"

"Sahib, I too have heard such sounds on a few occasions. They come once in a while from around the oak tree. Music too. And English people speaking. In the beginning, once, I went near the oak tree to check what was going on. There was nothing, no one, but . . . but . . ."

"But what, Jharku?" Pa sounded nervous.

"Sahib, someone unseen pushed me and said—get out." Now everyone was staring at Jharku uneasily. "That's why I prefer to stay in the veranda of the main building and seldom venture beyond it. Never in the direction of the cottage at night. And, and my lantern is a big solace. Ghosts are afraid of the fire, I think . . ."

Mrs. Kulkarni's jaw fell open. She was visibly trembling. Mr. Kulkarni had discernibly paled. Jharku noted none and continued, "I wanted to warn you about it, Sahib, when the arrangements were being made for Kulkarni Sahib's stay in the cottage. Many people have experienced strange things there—mysterious encounters. They hid it from you thinking you wouldn't believe. Like you didn't believe Nandy Sahib and Ballabh." There was a nerve-racking silence in the room now. Jharku hesitated and then said, "Sahib, I have heard that this building used to be for the parties of the *Gora Sahibs.* "

Pa nodded gently, and wondered—had they also buried their dead here, under the old oak . . .

Thereafter, Mr. and Mrs. Kulkarni blatantly refused to go anywhere near the cottage. The brave team of Jharku, Bishnu, and a few others brought their luggage to the main building. The cottage was locked and made redundant.

Despite just a day-old acquaintance, Mrs. Kulkarni seemed the saddest to see us leave the next day. She hugged Ma with tears streaming down her cheeks.

Merely two months later Pa received an urgent letter from Mr. Kulkarni. He had sought his immediate transfer back to Delhi. His wife had fallen seriously ill. The doctors had diagnosed it as Severe Depression and Mental Disturbance. She had been advised an immediate change of location.

THE HOSPITAL ROOM

A sudden angry cry resonated through the empty corridor of the hospital and reached the nurses' station of the floor. Two young nurses on night duty stared at each other with fear-filled eyes. Sister Nirmala, the matron on duty that night was in the room behind the nurses' station when she heard it too. She came running to check. "Somebody's in distress. Why are you two still glued to your seats?" she reprimanded them.

Usha, the older of the two nurses, spoke hesitatingly, "Ma'am, this isn't the first time. It's been happening for the past few months. The screams—sometimes angry howls—come from room twenty-three. Many have heard them."

Room twenty-three was the last, dark, dingy room of the private ward situated on the first floor of the hospital. An equally dark narrow corridor lined with white, bare walls led to the room.

"Yes, Ma'am. That's true," Julian, the other nurse said. "And they are heard particularly when the room is vacant. Today too, there's no patient in that room."

"What rubbish!" Sister Nirmala frowned. "Come with me. Let's go and check." She boldly strode towards room twenty-three, expecting the nurses to follow her.

She stood outside the room. The door was partly open. *It should have been locked when not in use. How careless of the staff.* At that instant she heard a growling sound. Momentarily, she was unnerved. Then, gathering courage, she shoved open the door. Before entering the room, she looked back. There was no one behind her. The nurses hadn't followed her command. *They need pulling up, the disobedient lot* . She gritted her teeth, wavered for a second, and then entered

the room alone.

The room was dark and cold. It had a stale, festering stench of decay, unlike the other rooms that smelled fresh—of antiseptics and sanitizers. The curtains were not drawn. Faint moonlight seeped in through the bay window and that's where her vision stopped—at the window. She became immobile. Someone stood there, watching her intently. Then the shadowy figure began to move towards her. "There you are . . . at last," she clearly heard a man's voice. Instantly, she heard the door shut with a bang behind her. Nirmala stood rooted to the floor. Her vision had got adjusted to the darkness by now. The figure was approaching her, slowly, gradually. When it was barely five feet away, she recognized the face. A loud shriek escaped her throat and she rushed towards the door. It was tightly shut now. She pushed it. It was jammed, as if it hadn't been opened for years. She banged it with her shivering fisted hands and shouted continuously.

Then, she felt two hands on the nape of her neck. The pressure on her neck slowly increased. She began to lose consciousness. Just then the door opened and two nurses along with a ward-boy stood outside, shaky and worried. She fell into their arms.

This was October of the year 1968, in a private hospital in Shimla district.

May 1969, around eleven in the morning, Renuka was alone in room twenty-three of the first floor private ward. Her husband and son-in-law had been outside the delivery room for the past two hours. She too had been there, but then she had paced outside the delivery room so nervously, and appeared so stressed while Arunima was in labour, that the doctor had asked the nurse to take her to the room to rest. She didn't want to attend to an extra patient.

Renuka stood at the door, staring at the sad, vacant hollowness that enveloped the room. A patient's bed, a table, a chair, and an attendant's bed in the other corner constituted the bare minimum furniture. A bay window faced the straight wall of the mountain, allowing very little light into the room. As a result, the room was dark and dingy, and needed artificial lighting even at daytime.

The nurse had immediately retreated after opening the door for her, leaving her alone. Renuka had failed to notice the pity and fear in the nurse's eyes. The room felt undue cold and unwelcoming as Renuka stepped in after locking the door. She wrinkled her nose at the strong musty odour that filled the room.

Something was not right here. Something repulsed her. Renuka shivered nervously as a cold draught hit her. She had never before felt so strangely uneasy and turned to go back to request a change of the room. Then thinking

that probably all rooms in the hospital would be the same, she changed her mind. Moreover, if Arunima had a normal delivery as expected, they wouldn't need to stay here for more than two days. With these thoughts, she consoled her troubled mind.

She was too tensed up to rest and decided to utilize the time preparing the room. She opened the bags they had earlier dumped here in a hurry. To overcome her fear and anxiety she sang holy hymns as she took out things from the bags. The first to come out was the baby's toiletries bag and she carefully kept it on the small side table next to the patient's bed. As she looked at the things she had pulled out, a loud thump behind her made her jump. The bag lay on the floor—liquid oozing from it began to create a large stain on the floor. She knew that a glass bottle containing some lotion had broken.

She stood staring at the mess, simply unable to understand how the bag could fall when she had placed it so carefully. She rushed to the bathroom to fetch paper towels to clean the fast-spreading stain. The bathroom was dark and icy cold. It felt as if the door of a refrigerator had been opened. Then she heard faint dragging footfalls. Someone had followed her in. The main door was locked. She switched on the light and looked around. The empty space stared back at her. A strange, baffling fear began to grip her heart. She shivered and hurriedly retreated into the room with the towels.

Renuka unpacked the other stuff, setting it in the cupboard, loudly chanting holy songs all the while. And while she walked about the room, she continued to feel a presence—a mild rustle, a shuffle, a faint shadow. There was nothing perceivable in the room, but there definitely was something. She had a strong intuition. An occasional knock on a distant door and soft debating voices were the external comforting noises, reminders of the close human presence and help.

Half an hour later, her husband brought her the news of the birth of their grandson. She heaved a sigh of relief. Both the mother and the baby were well. All anxiety forgotten instantly, and with her husband around, the uncanny fear receded to the back of her mind. It was perhaps a conception of an edgy mind and new settings, which were making her uneasy. Soon the jubilant father of the newborn joined them in the room and the atmosphere became one of respite and celebrations. In the evening, both the mother and the baby were shifted to the room. Renuka became too occupied even to remember the inexplicable presence she had felt that morning.

Around seven in the evening, the men left for home. They intended to pick up dinner on the way and would be back the next afternoon. Feeding Arunima the diet supplied by the hospital catering, Renuka ate the sandwiches

and coffee she had ordered. A nurse came around nine to help Arunima breastfeed her baby. Renuka found her behaviour strange as she endlessly kept shifting her eyes around the room. She was clearly very discomfited.

After the nurse was gone, Renuka proposed, "For tonight I'll keep the baby's crib next to my bed and look after him. You need rest. Don't wake up unless necessary. I'll let you know when it is baby's feeding time." Arunima nodded and watched her mother drag the crib next to her bed rather gratefully. She was exhausted and within minutes was fast asleep.

With both the mother and the baby tranquilly asleep, Renuka sat down to pray. She thanked God for the beautiful gift—their bundle of joy. She prayed to God to bless the newborn and keep him safe always. After reading a few verses of the Bhagavad Gita, and then keeping it on the bedside table, she switched off the light. She might have to get up frequently at night; therefore, she decided to steal as many winks as she could.

The night bulb was on, spreading gentle comforting light in the room. The day's mental and physical fatigue mixed with the relief for her daughter's safe delivery, the joy of having entered the grandmotherhood, and Renuka was soon snoring softly.

It was around midnight. Something woke Renuka up. She was drenched in sweat and struggling to breathe. Where was she? Was it a nightmare she had seen? She raised her head. The door of the room was directly in front of her. It was shut. A door painted white, and with a brass knob handle. This was the door she had seen in her dream! She had seen the golden knob turning and the door opening. She took a few deep breaths to calm her nerves. Then she dropped her head back on the pillow and lay speculating. Who was the man with blood pouring down his body? She had so vividly seen him enter this room through the door. It didn't feel like a dream at all. It seemed so real. She remembered him standing and staring at her with murder in his eyes. He had then spoken something before walking towards her menacingly. She was getting ready to defend herself when she had woken with a start.

Renuka surveyed the room. It seemed empty, gloomy, and very cold. She shivered and raised her head to peek at the baby. He was sleeping serenely. Arunima too was blissfully asleep. She wondered what the time was. Her watch was kept in the cupboard and she had no intention of getting up. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep.

Ten minutes later she heard Arunima moaning and her eyes flew open. She instantly noted a faint shadow bent over her daughter. As the shadow gradually became distinct Arunima's struggles intensified. Renuka's heart skipped a beat. Whose shadow was that? She tried getting off the bed but felt as if she was tethered to it. Arunima was now cursing audibly. Two shadowy

hands barely inches above her neck were slowly pressing down, suffocating her. Her curses changed to prayers, "Ram, Ram . . ." With an effort, Renuka sat up. Just then, the shadow began to straighten up. "Where's she?" a gruff male's voice reverberated in the room. Renuka saw the shadow turn its head towards her. It seemed to be directly staring at her. And, this time, it was no dream. Though it was the same eerie figure she had recently seen in her dream. She was drenched in sweat once again and her heart jumped out of her ribs. The shadow straightened up and began to move towards her. The baby's crib was between her and the shadow. The baby was in danger. Renuka mustered up her energy and jumped out of the bed. She had barely snatched the baby from the crib and wrapped him in her protective arms when the crib shook dangerously. She stepped back. The electric bulb, along with the complete contraption, crashed on the baby's pillow. Renuka stared horrified.

Arunima was now trying to sit up. "Mama, what's going on? I am so scared. Someone is here. He tried to strangle me." She was crying hysterically. And then, she saw it—a ghostly shadow near her mother—and screamed. She made a futile effort to leave her bed. Her mother was holding the baby in her arms, shaking violently, and chanting mantras.

Then they both heard a distinct growling, like a breeze against the dry leaves, or a distant rumble of the thunder. "Jaaoooo . . ."

Renuka rushed to Arunima. "Arunima, get up, get up quick." She almost dragged her out of her bed. Supporting her daughter by her left arm while holding the baby in her right, she rushed towards the door.

Renuka turned the knob and pushed the door to open it. The door didn't budge. It had been opened a number of times during the day but it was never stuck like this. She turned to check where that spectre was. A misty but distinct shadow stood right behind. It was then that she felt a strong blow on her left cheek. A terrible chill ran down her spine. She shrieked, and so did Arunima. "WHERE'S SHE?" they both heard again. In that moment Renuka realized that the ghostly entity was searching for someone. "Keep away from us," she shouted, putting her entire effort to open the door. "*Om bhur bhuvah svah* . . ." The door opened with a creaking sound. "*Om bhur bhuvah svah, tatsaviturvarenyam* . . ." Renuka chanted loudly in her shivering voice as they rushed out.

The nurses on night duty noticed the ladies rushing towards them. "What's wrong? The patient is not supposed to be out like this . . ." Then perceiving their panicky faces, they rushed to their aid. "Th-there's someone in the room, a, a gh-ghost, wants to kill us," Arunima whispered in her quivering voice. Renuka added, "Angry and violent! We b-both saw it. We can't s-stay in that room, not with our baby." She wheezed and gasped.

The nurses shuddered and stared at them. "Well . . . I'll speak with the matron," one of them mumbled.

"We'll try to get your room changed as soon as the office opens at eight," the other one tried reassuring, not knowing how else to help.

"What about now? I can't stand here the whole night!" Arunima moaned in pain and shivered. The nurses looked at each other indecisively, fear dripping down their eyes. When Arunima swooned and almost collapsed on the floor, they swung into action. Both the ladies were then offered seats and water.

A deathly silence followed the frenzy. The four ladies just stared at each other and down the corridor, expecting the ghost to appear there any minute. The clock ticked loudly, competing with the sounds of heavy breathing. Renuka incessantly mumbled prayers. The baby slept peacefully in his grandma's arms. Ten minutes passed in a morbid hush. Renuka and Arunima gradually calmed down and gathered the courage to brief the nurses of their terrifying experience in undertones lest they call for the wrath of the supernatural being in their close proximity.

"Before we rushed out, I felt a blow on my face. It's still paining," Renuka concluded, rubbing her cheek lightly. In the bright light of the nursing station, the other women gawked in shock. Renuka's left cheek was so distinctly different from her right one. It was swollen and red, slowly acquiring a purplish tinge. That was clear evidence that someone had recently punched her hard on her face.

"He's getting stronger and vicious," whispered the nurse.

The next day, soon after Renuka lodged a complaint with the hospital authorities, the whole hospital was rife with the report of the attack the previous night. Rumours were flying about a presence haunting room twenty-three. Nursing staff exchanged glances that clearly conveyed—*We were right. The room is haunted. But nobody paid us any heed.*

The victimized ladies were accommodated in a new room on the same floor, after they had spent a restless night in the nurses' room.

Now the baby was asleep. Renuka constantly moved around needlessly shifting things in the room. The usual divine brightness on her lovely face seemed obscured. Worry had accentuated her faint age lines. The more she thought about it, the more she became convinced that the ghost was angry, was seeking someone—and it wasn't them. That's why he had let them go. Something needed to be done urgently.

Arunima lay in the bed limply, watching her mother at her futile activity. She refused to discuss the incident. She was afraid that the ghost was probably

hanging around, listening to them. She was afraid for her baby. The evil ghost had attacked the baby too, and then her mother. The thought continuously sent shivers down her spine.

A sudden knock on the door startled them both. They stared at the door anxiously. After a while there was another knock. "Yes, come in," Renuka timorously voiced. The door was slowly pushed open. It was the matron visiting them. They were expecting her visit as they had been told she wanted to have a word with them.

Matron Nirmala was a middle-aged fair lady with a round face and a pinched nose. She looked every bit professional in her crisp white uniform. But the worried look on her face wasn't encouraging at all. "I heard about what happened last night. It was really very unfortunate." She shook her head and came to stand next to Arunima's bed. "Yesterday morning, when I came to know that the room had been allotted to a new mother, I had protested with the clerical staff. There's something in that room, I told them again."

Both the ladies scowled at her. Arunima queried, "You knew about the ghost? You should have taken some action and not jeopardized lives."

"I have informed the authorities a number of times about it. You are not the first one to experience the paranormal here. There have been three or four instances earlier too. But the administration is not ready to believe me. Neither have they done anything to even confirm my reports."

"Matron, what if the ghost has followed us here?" Arunima's hands shot up to cover her cheeks in reaction. She inspected the room with frightened eyes. The outlay of this room was exactly like the last one, perhaps like all other rooms of the hospital. "Oh my God! I don't want to stay here another day. I want to go home today."

Her mother protested even more intensely. "Yes. We can't stay here a day longer. No way! This hospital is creepy."

"Arunima, your discharge won't be possible today," Matron Nirmala said, putting her comforting hand on her shoulder. "Your attending doctor has already left written instructions for your discharge tomorrow. She wants you under observation for one more day. That's the procedure of the hospital. Anyway, it's only one more night. You'll be fine in this room. The bizarre things only happen in the room you have vacated."

"Why is it so?" Arunima puckered her brows in worry and annoyance.

"I can't say for sure." The matron shrugged. "Now why don't you rest? You need it." She was clearly avoiding to have any more discussions.

Renuka was not going to relent so easily. Now that Matron Nirmala had openly accepted a presence in that room, she must go to the core of the problem and get the mystery solved. "It is believed that if someone has an

untimely and violent death, the spirit does not get its eternal peace. Isn't that true?" She looked at the nurse with narrowed eyes. "There must be many people that died in the hospital—painful, untimely deaths?"

"Yes, that is obvious. The hospital may not be a pleasant place always." Nirmala nodded and then smiled at Arunima, "But a happy place too, when the little ones arrive." She noted that her effort of cheering up the frightened ladies was going futile. She shrugged and moved towards the door.

"Did anything bad happen in that room? Did someone have a painful death there?" Arunima persisted and dragged herself on her elbows to get into a partial sitting position. Her mother rushed to place pillows behind her for support and then sat down next to her. "It seems the ghost wanted us out of the room, and would have even harmed us." Arunima visibly shuddered. "It was my mother's prayers that helped. She's a very religious lady, you know. Yet she was targeted, and so evidently. Look at her cheek. See what the ghost has done to her. It could have been worse—one of us could have been killed." Arunima's eyes expanded in fear at her own statement. "Why has that angry spirit lodged itself in that particular room?"

With one hand on the doorknob, Matron Nirmala hesitated and then came to stand next to the open window. Leaning on the wall, she sighed. She hadn't been easy ever since then—since that fateful day almost a year ago. And then, after that attack on her, she had always been mortally afraid. She had kept the secret buried inside her for too long, and now she needed to unburden herself. "Alright, I'll like to share something with you." She folded her arms across her chest and nodded. "But what I am going to share with you mustn't go beyond this room. It could cost me my job."

"Of course!" Renuka and Arunima nodded in unison. "It won't! We are only interested in solving the mystery and maybe help do something about it." Arunima's lips quivered as she spoke. "It shouldn't happen to anybody else. It was too scary!" She wiped the droplets of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand.

Matron Nirmala dragged a chair next to the bed and sat down close to the ladies. Folding her hands on her lap and narrowing her eyes, she sighed. "Well then. The strange things in that room started happening about a year ago, after the police brought a seriously injured young man to the hospital's emergency. I was the first person to attend to him before the doctor arrived." She looked at Arunima and then became quiet. She sat quietly looking down at her hands. A feeling of guilt had seeped in. Was it right to discuss this matter with a patient? Was it within the protocol?

Breaking the silence, Renuka probed, "How was he injured? Accident?" Both the ladies were looking at her like detectives resolute to solve a murder

mystery. Nirmala smiled. They were not going to concede till they knew it all. Perhaps they truly wanted to help.

Only a handful of the hospital staff has experienced the supernatural in that room, specifically the night staff, though their encounters have not been as alarming as mine. But no one talks about it openly. These two ladies are now my means to shake up the dozing authorities to take action. The spirit needs to be expunged through an expert medium. It is dangerous for others . . . for me. "What we gathered from the escorting relatives of the critically injured man was that the family row had turned violent and his own uncle had attacked him with a dagger, thrusting it into his chest. He was brought to the hospital with the dagger still embedded in his body."

"Oh my God!" Arunima gasped.

Matron Nirmala shook her head sadly. "He was a handsome young man, well-qualified, with a fairly good job. He had come home on leave to get married and became a victim of the family row. Maybe someone in the family was jealous of him."

"Oh! Then?"

"When the young doctor on the emergency duty, a freshly recruited surgeon, came to attend to him, the wounded man had already lost a lot of blood. But he was conscious—was able to talk despite the intense pain." Nirmala paused to take a deep breath. "I knew it was a serious case. Fortunately, the dagger hadn't punctured his heart, but it may have been just inches away from it. We rushed him to the operation theatre. The anaesthetist arrived and the doctor was getting ready to go ahead with the surgery. But he seemed nervous. He had finished his specialization barely six months ago and didn't have much experience."

"Who was the doctor?" Arunima asked.

"I rather not name him. That doesn't matter now. He's not working here any longer."

"Oh. So what happened?"

"I quickly inserted the cannula, started IV, and then rushed to call the blood bank for blood. I also decided to call our senior surgeon, Dr. Singla, who was out attending a meeting. I had a strong feeling that someone experienced should handle that patient. Dr. Singla said he was rushing back and asked me to transfuse blood to the patient and tell the junior doctor to wait for him." Matron Nirmala's shoulders slumped. With her eyes downcast, she continued, "But while I was on the phone, the silly doctor pulled the dagger out in one strong jerk, thinking it was necessary to save the man's life. In the process he seemed to have slashed the patient's major artery. Blood gushed out from the victim's body like from a fountain."

"Oh my God!" Arunima winced.

"Downright irresponsible doctor!" Renuka scowled. "How could he commit such a blunder?"

"Actually, the knife was slightly curved, and the doctor had no idea about it. He could have X-rayed it, but probably thought he couldn't afford to waste time. He didn't have any wrong intentions. He was just in a hurry to save the patient's life."

"And that hurry cost him his life," Arunima grimaced.

"Did the injured man die immediately?" Renuka prodded.

"No, I tried to prevent his bleeding by applying pressure. I used up all the bundles of gauzes available but the bleeding was profuse. I tried my best, but I knew it was too late. I knew we wouldn't be able to save the man." Nirmala closed her eyes tightly. "Just then, the young man suddenly woke up; perhaps we hadn't injected enough anaesthesia. While I desperately tried to stop the blood flow, he tried to say something to me. He uttered a few guttural sounds that sounded angry, like some abusive words. Then he became silent as his life ebbed away. We all stood around him helplessly watching his violent tremors —the throes of death."

"But how's that connected to the presence of the supernatural entity in room twenty-three?" Renuka regarded Nirmala probingly.

"Because that's where he finally breathed his last."

"But you said you took him to the OT."

"Well, when I told the doctor about the senior doctor's instructions, he freaked. 'Let's take him to a room and pretend we never brought him to the OT,' he suggested. When I refused, he began begging the three of us—another nurse, the anaesthetist, and me. 'My job, my whole career is in jeopardy, please, please . . .' he continued to plead. Half-heartedly we relented and slyly took the unconscious patient to room twenty-three."

"Why to that room?" Renuka inquired.

"For a few reasons—it was at the back, away from prying eyes, and vacant at that time."

"Hmm . . ."

"So the man died in that room. An angry man who knew he had been botched up." Arunima tightly shut her eyes. Two tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Yes. And I was the last person he had seen and spoken to before dying. That was not all. I lied to the senior doctor that the dagger had been taken out after the man had died. Dr. Singla trusted me and never asked any questions." Matron Nirmala clamped her forehead in her hands and moaned. "I breached his trust to save the reputation of a careless doctor. It was a bad conspiracy." After a minute of hush, she lifted her head. "I knew that it was a big blunder

on my part, to have docilely obeyed the doctor. If we had just focused on stopping the blood flow, starting him on blood transfusion, and had waited for Dr. Singla, perhaps we could have saved him. We wasted precious time rushing him to the room furtively. How reckless on our part!" Nirmala's hands were fidgety on her lap. She had shared the sordid affair with someone for the first time and part of the heavy burden lying on her heart seemed to have eased. She sighed.

The wall clock went on ticking. The newborn continued to sleep blissfully, unaware of the danger his little life had almost encountered. The ladies went sad and silent. Renuka mumbled prayers. Nirmala sighed and then continued with her narration. "A few days later, when I went to the room one night, I *saw* him." She covered her eyes with her palms and shuddered. Then she slowly lifted her head. She had visibly gone pale. "There was no one else in the room. As I entered I saw a shadow standing next to the window. Then it turned to look directly at me. It was him. I knew instantly. The same handsome face, though only a shadow of the original man. His face was distorted in anger."

"Oh my God! Weren't you scared?"

"Of course. I shrieked and then fainted." Nirmala didn't want to divulge the whole episode.

"So only you saw the ghost?" Renuka asked.

"Yes."

"Why do you think he was angry at you?" Arunima asked.

"I feel it's because we . . . I had let him die, when he had the will to live. He was to get married just a week later, you know. He had hope in us, that we would save his life."

"So you think it's the same ghost that troubled us last night?"

"Yes. And this was not the first time. Other patients have complained about strange things happening in that room."

Arunima shivered, recalling her brush with the eerie ghost the previous night. "Did you ever go to that room again?" she prodded.

"I avoided going there for about a month after I first saw him. But you know duty is duty. I was with a patient there, one evening, around eight. I had entered with precaution, looking around to make sure there was nothing untoward. Things must have settled down, I thought and relaxed. My accompanying nurse got busy giving an injection to the patient and I stood watching. And then I had a strong feeling of being watched. I looked up, and there he was, standing on the opposite side of the bed, glaring at me angrily." Nirmala shuddered visibly. The memory had shaken her all over again. "I rushed out of the room before he could do anything to me."

"So, this ghost is still in that room, where his spirit had left his body. His spirit has remained there even after his body was removed and cremated." Renuka stood up and slowly walked to the window. It was a serious matter. The restless angry spirit needed to rest in peace now.

Arunima probed, "You said earlier that you had reported the matter to the authorities, and also that some other patients had had similar experiences."

"Yes. The same night that patient felt a weird presence in the room. He rang the bell in the middle of the night. I wasn't on duty but came to know about it the next day. The patient complained of someone roughly pulling his sheets. He also felt something heavy sitting with a force on him, hurting him. But he couldn't spot anyone in the room. The patient was alone, without an attendant. He was terrified."

"Naturally . . ."

"Then, a few days later I again had to go there, how very reluctant I was. It was sometime during the evening. I didn't have the courage to go alone, took another nurse with me. Once again, I didn't see anyone on entering the room. After finishing dressing the patient who had had a minor surgery, I walked towards the washroom to wash my hands. I was still at the door when I felt a strong push. I staggered, saved myself from falling flat on the floor by grabbing the washbasin. Then the bathroom door closed behind me with a bang. The other nurse saw it all. She kept her nerve and rushed to open the door and help me. We both then rushed out of the room. The patient kept calling us to know why we were rushing out."

"That must have been scary!"

"That's not all. You know, that patient, with just a minor surgery of gall bladder removal, died all of a sudden that night. No one knows what happened. There was nothing serious with him. But he suffered a massive heart arrest without any history of heart disease. I saw him before he was taken away to the mortuary. His eyes were bulging, as if he had suffered extreme fright before dying. That terrified me." Colour drained from Nirmala's face as she recalled what happened that day. "I went to the hospital management to speak about my fears. They just laughed at me. Said I was mentally unhinged, was hallucinating, and wondered if I was fit for the job." She had tears in her eyes. "I had to keep quiet to save my job. I have a family to support, three children. My husband is a philanderer, doesn't contribute."

"What about the doctor who had removed the dagger, and the other nurse who was there with you when the man had died? And the anaesthetist?" Arunima asked.

"The doctor left within fifteen days of the incident, reason not given. But I did notice him slowly becoming nervous; at times he appeared highly

distressed. Something was going on, I knew. So did the anaesthetist. He joined another hospital. And the nurse fell sick, really sick. She went home on medical leave and never returned. I have no news of anyone of them. So, that leaves only me." Nirmala sat with her head bowed. Her hands were mildly shaking. "Each time I've been to the room, strange things have happened. When I came to know yesterday that the room had been allotted to a lady about to deliver a baby, I panicked. I rushed to the office to get your room changed, but the clerks didn't pay me any heed. They said I was going nuts."

"But they changed it today, finally," Renuka quipped.

"That's because of your loud protest. It's good that you refused to go back to the room even to collect your things." Nirmala nodded. "Before you leave the hospital, make sure to complain to the nurses, doctors, and if possible, go to the director too. The dozing authorities need to be woken up."

"Matron Nirmala, I can't spend another night in this hospital. I won't be able to sleep," Arunima reiterated.

"It's too late now. The discharge will happen only tomorrow morning. I'm sorry."

The baby woke up just then and began to cry. Nirmala picked him up, cooed the baby to soothe him and then handed him to his mother. She then walked towards the door. "I have to go back to work now. I used my pre-lunch tea break to come here. I'll come again in the evening, after my shift is over. We'll plan what to do next."

"Sure," Renuka nodded.

"You'll be safe in this room, I assure you." Matron Nirmala turned from near the door and gave an encouraging smile to the ladies. "If you need anything don't hesitate to ask." She took a step and halted again. "By the way, have you got all your stuff? I had assigned my best ward-boy to shift your bags to this room."

Arunima abruptly looked up. She seemed to have remembered something. "Mama, are my gold chain and bangles with you? The nurse in the delivery room had made me take them off. I had asked her to give them to you."

"Oh my God, they are still in that room. No one fetched them for us. I had totally forgotten. After the nurse of the delivery room had handed them over to me, I had wrapped them up in a pink handkerchief and kept them in the cupboard, right at the back of the third shelf." She sounded panicky. "Matron, please help us recover our gold."

Nirmala halted at the door. "Don't worry. I'll make arrangements to retrieve your jewellery."

"Make sure someone trustworthy goes to the room to get them," Renuka entreated.

Matron Nirmala nodded and walked out of the room, softly closing it behind her.

Nirmala walked to the nursing station to find someone to send to the room. There was not a single nurse there. All were busy with their allotted patients. The ward-boys were missing too. She hesitated. *It's daytime. This ghost has been active mostly at night. Besides, I just have to get in, grab the little bundle from the cupboard, and get out. This is a small help I can confer on the sweet ladies.* Making up her mind, she boldly walked towards the room. She halted in front of the door. No sound came from the room. It was deathly calm and quiet. She turned the knob. The door opened with ease. She walked in, leaving the door wide open. When she was in the middle of the room, a loud sound behind her made her jump. The door had banged shut. *Who did that?* She turned and rushed to it. She tried opening it. No matter how much effort she put, the door just wouldn't budge. She began banging the door in utter desperation.

The loud banging made some nurses rush to help. They tried opening the door but utterly failed. It seemed the door had been locked from inside. It needed to be broken open. It was then that they heard an unearthly snigger escape from the room.

Matron Nirmala heard it too. From right behind her. She slowly turned. The ghost stood close to her, smiling, enjoying her helplessness. "There you are," a gruff voice sent her legs trembling. "I have been so, so patient, waiting for you to enter here alone." The ghost began to move towards her, slowly, deviously. Nirmala stepped back. She was now wedged between the ghost and the door. There was no escape. She saw two ghostly hands slowly moving towards her throat. She felt suffocated. *Oh God, save me please.* Her heart was jumping out of her body. A severe pain erupted in her chest. *I'm going to have a heart attack. God, help me.* These were the last thoughts on her mind before she fell on the floor with a loud thump.

When she woke up next she was still in the room. She felt at ease. She was alive. And then she saw him, standing next to the window, regarding her with the same wily smile playing on his lips. Nirmala screamed and once again rushed to the door. She put all her effort to open it. It was still jammed.

"Please, let me go. I'm sorry, Hari, for what happened."

"YOUR APOLOGY ISN'T GONNA BRING ME BACK TO LIFE! I am sure you know by now, Aunt, that your husband thrust that dagger into my body—the jealous, good-for-nothing, evil man. He had eyes on my bride-to-be, wanting her to himself. And you . . . You knew me so well, YET YOU LET ME DIE!"

Nirmala staggered to the floor. "My husband is a vile man. And believe

me, I wanted to save you, I honestly tried. The blunder was made by the doctor."

Hari stepped towards her, his face now inches away from Nirmala's. "Doesn't matter what you say. Now you are with me. And together we'll take revenge from the man who destroyed us."

"No, we won't. You are dead, but I have a life to go back to. Please let me go; my children need me, I must go home to them."

"What makes you think you can go home?" the ghost tilted his head, giving a hollow laugh. He was looking at something behind Nirmala, on the floor.

Nirmala followed his gaze and turned to look behind. She then stared open-mouthed, her eyes protruding from shock, her face ghostly pale as she noted a body lying on the floor, a body in a matron's uniform—her body.

That morning, shattering the hospital calm, a blood-curdling cry and a burst of eerie laughter rose in unison from room twenty-three, navigated through the corridors, and resonated in the entire floor.

LONELY IN DEATH

Sagar had recently been transferred to Chamba, an enchanting Himalayan town situated on a mountain ledge between Dhauladhar and Zanskar ranges with the panoramic view of the meandering spurting river Ravi a few hundred feet below.

Sagar had an added reason for joy when he received the orders for the transfer. Chamba was his hometown, his birthplace—he had spent his entire childhood and school days here. He had left it to join the undergraduate studies at Jalandhar because there was no college in Chamba. Immediately after college he got a job and life became demanding. He had hardly been home for more than a week ever since. Even when he'd got married five years ago, he had taken just ten days off. Now he was coming back home once again, with his wife and three-year-old son, Ankur. His wife Sushma was expecting their second child.

His parents lived in a charming three-storeyed wood and grey shale house. Sagar was their second son among four. With all of them settled in different towns, the parents had been living alone for many years. They were now happy to have one of their sons coming to live with them. The unoccupied ground floor was cleaned, aired, and made ready for the family.

Typical of the houses in Chamba, the entire topmost floor was a massive dining hall with a large kitchen in one corner. This vast space was exclusively for community feasts, locally called *dhaam* . The south-facing wall of this hall that extended into the kitchen was lined with series of small windows that presented a panoramic view of the sunrise and the sunset, and also of the famous Chaugaan, the bazaars around it, Akhand Chandi—the erstwhile palace of the king, the top *chhatris* of Laxmi Narayan Mandir, and the red flags

atop Chamunda Devi Mandir flapping in the breeze.

Chaugaan was a well-maintained multi-use grassy field, the largest flat area of the town, which was a playground for children, a meeting ground for grown-ups, a place for holding public and political meetings, etcetera. Once a year, the famous Minjar fair was held here. Sagar had so many memories attached to Chaugaan. So much of his childhood had been spent here—playing or chatting with friends.

Now after a really long gap, he was going to be back to this place of his old connections. He had always missed the warmth of his typical hill house with a slanting roof of grey slate, like most houses here, imparting the town its striking aura.

On a cool August evening of the year 1965, Sagar reached Chamba with his family. After dumping their luggage in the portico, a happy chit-chat with parents on the first floor veranda, cups of hot masala chai, a special meal in the kitchen that his mother had prepared to welcome them, the family moved to the ground floor for the night. It had been a tiring journey and after taking out the bare essentials from their luggage, they got into the bed. Ankur had gone to sleep earlier than usual.

As Sushma extended her hand to switch off the lamp, Sagar stopped her. "No, Sush, let it be on for some time."

Sushma looked at him in surprise. "Why, Sagar? What happened today? You always want the light to be switched off as soon as you hit the bed."

"I don't know why. I don't want it to be dark just yet."

"Are you okay?"

"Sort of."

"Please, Sagar, tell me. What's the matter?"

"I don't know, Sush. I have this strange feeling. I am truly happy to be back here. It has always been the only real home for me. But I have this sad, distressing feeling deep in my heart. I don't know why I feel like that. There's no reason." Sagar rubbed his forehead with his fingers.

"You are tired. We have had a long day today. Even I am exhausted." Sushma pulled the quilt up to her neck and closed her eyes.

"No, Sushma, it has nothing to do with fatigue. I am used to travelling a lot, you know that. It is a feeling—a depressing, dismal feeling—that I have never felt before."

"Do you think it has something to do with your heart? Maybe you should see a doctor tomorrow."

"You are talking as if I am going to have a heart attack! It is not that. It is just a feeling. I feel sad. Doctors can't cure sadness, can they? It is not like I am suffering from depression. I was fine till dinnertime."

"Then it must be the food that you have eaten. I saw how you were eating with gusto."

"It's got nothing to do with food. Never mind. You won't understand. Go to sleep." Turning his back to her, Sagar pretended to sleep. Sushma switched off the lamp.

But sleep wouldn't come easily to Sagar. He felt awfully restless. He could find no reason for his gloom. He had always been a happy-go-lucky person—was thrilled to be back home. He had been so happy with the thought of spending quality time with his parents after a long gap. Then, why had this melancholy seeped into him, enveloping him tightly into a strong grip?

In the middle of the night, he got up to go to the toilet. The toilet was outside, at the other end of the central courtyard. A door from the glazed veranda, into which the ground floor bedrooms opened, led to the courtyard.

As Sagar stepped out of the veranda door into the courtyard, he felt a light touch on his shoulder. Someone was trying to draw his attention. He stopped and turned, and for a moment he could swear that he spotted a shadow that faded instantly. He shut and opened his eyes. Perhaps he needed to get his eyes checked. He then went back and switched on the light that flooded the courtyard. There was no one around. *Maybe it was just the breeze* . He tried calming his unease even though he knew it wasn't windy at all. Finishing his business, he hurriedly returned and slipped under his warm quilt. He was shivering. An icy layer of cold seemed to have swooped around him.

The next morning, he woke up fatigued. He was to join his new office as its head, but there was no excitement about it anymore. What had gone wrong with him in just a few hours? When he had landed here last evening, he had been full of enthusiasm; he wanted to begin his career with a renewed verve.

As the day progressed, Sagar began to settle down. The new office, meeting his new staff, getting to know the nitty-gritties of his work, beginning new assignments—it all kept him busy throughout the day. By the evening he was once again his original self, calm and easy-going. He returned home in better spirits. He played with his son, discussed the day's affairs with his wife, chatted with his parents over cups of tea, and returned to help Sushma set up their room. All done, Sushma declared that she was going to the kitchen to feed Ankur, before the adults had their dinner. "Come up after a little rest. I don't have the energy to run up and down. I'm tired after unpacking the whole day." And with these instructions she left him alone.

As soon as Sagar lay down, the day's weariness began to overpower him. He dozed off. He had been asleep for barely ten minutes when he woke up with a start. Someone had woken him up. He had distinctly felt someone shaking him, calling out his name. He looked around in a daze. The room was

icy and empty.

Sagar shivered and reluctantly got off the bed. He felt very tired—and very depressed. Sadness was all around, hovering like a thick fog, enveloping him, saturating him. Faint sounds were coming from the top floors. He felt an intense need to escape from his room, from isolation. Putting on his slippers, he rushed out to join his family. He didn't even stop to shut the door.

"Sushma, why did you run away hurriedly after shaking me awake?" he complained, huffing and puffing the moment he found her in the kitchen. She was helping his mother lay dinner. Ankur sat on a corner mat, playing with his toys.

"Waking you up? When?" Sushma asked without diverting her attention from her task.

"Why, hadn't you come down to wake me up just five minutes ago?"

"No, Sagar, I haven't left the kitchen ever since I came up half an hour ago. Isn't it, Ma ji?" Sagar's mother nodded to affirm. His father walked in at that moment. Seeing him, Sushma smiled, "Perhaps Daddy ji had gone down to wake you up."

"Gone where?" Sagar's father asked in astonishment.

"Dad, had you come down to my room five minutes ago to wake me up?" Sagar asked doubtfully. His father never liked waking anyone up, he knew. One of his set rules was that everyone should be allowed to sleep as much as their body needed.

"Why would I do that, knowing well you are tired after the day's hard work." After a pause to ponder, he said, "I haven't been downstairs ever since my return from the market in the afternoon. I have been reading my book since then." He sat down on a stool with a decisive nod.

"You must have been dreaming then," Sushma offered an explanation.

Sagar wasn't sure anymore. Perhaps Sushma was right. Yet the feeling that someone had shaken him awake was so strong. Was there a point getting disturbed over it? "Wow! What have you been cooking, Ma ji? I am starving." It was a sensible diversion to get composed.

The dinner was great. His mother had cooked his favourite food and the kitchen was suffused with the fragrance of exotic spices and steaming rice. He was relaxed and happy up here. The fire in the fireplace, lively chit-chat, and everyone's company comforted him. He sat talking for an hour after dinner and would have continued if Sushma hadn't reminded him that it was getting late and he was to leave for office early next morning.

As he followed Sushma downstairs, holding Ankur in his arms, Sagar felt the unexplained sadness return. He had a strong urge to return upstairs. Wouldn't Sushma mock him for his timidity? He followed her like a

compliant puppy.

Putting Ankur to bed, he checked all the doors. He then cuddled close to his wife and held her tightly in his arms. That made him feel better. More than the warmth of her body, it was her reassuring presence that did the trick. Within no time, he was in a deep sleep and snoring softly.

The following few days passed without a hitch. The work at his office was going fine. Sagar spent most of his evening time on upper floors and slept in Sushma's arms like a baby. The initial depression began to ebb. Perhaps he had been exhausted after winding up work at one place and starting afresh at another.

A fortnight later, on their second Sunday at Chamba, he had this sudden urge to visit a temple. Chamunda Devi Mandir atop Shah Madar range of hills had been his favourite, a place he used to visit often with his friends. He loved the uphill climb passing through a silent pristine forest. Sushma was happy at the proposal and hurriedly packed their picnic lunch. Ankur rushed around in excitement. He badly needed an outing.

It was quite a long walk. Sagar was hot and tired after carrying Ankur on his shoulders all the way up. After offering prayers in the temple, they found a shady spot to enjoy their picnic lunch. Today they were the only visitors at the temple. The priest had closed the temple doors and had gone to his lodgings at the back, probably for lunch.

Presently, Sagar began to get perturbed. He surveyed his surroundings. Something was around that was making him uneasy. He could strongly sense it. It was then that he noted the steel box heavy with parathas move slowly. The movement was very mild, just about an inch, but distinct. He stared dumbfounded. Even a strong breeze couldn't have moved the box thus. And it wasn't breezy. Then how did the box move? Who did that? He looked at Sushma. She was feeding Ankur, unmindful of what had happened. Was there someone else here, someone he couldn't see, who was trying to share their space and meals? Sagar was flummoxed. "Sushma, if you are done, let's go back. We must reach home before it gets dark." Sushma looked up at the sun. It was way far from the horizon. They could have easily spent an hour more, but she quietly nodded. Soon after she finished eating, she packed up. Lately, Sagar's behaviour had begun to intrigue her. He had been acting odd ever since they had come to this town. Something was just not right.

All through their return trip, Sagar kept turning to look back. He had this funny feeling of being followed. This was giving creeps to Sushma. She too turned a number of times but found nothing. There was no one around, then why was Sagar behaving as if they were in danger of being ambushed?

Once back home, Sushma and Ankur went upstairs. Sagar decided to stretch his back and lay down on his bed. The light of the day was slowly fading and soon it would be dinnertime. He could rest till then.

The window of the room was open and the fresh breeze brought in slight October chill of the mountains. The fragrance of the blooming jasmine bushes in a flowerbed right outside the window seeped in too. Though Sagar was enjoying the fresh breeze, he was shivering from the cold. He needed to close the window. But when he turned to look at it, he saw a shadow there. A sudden chill entered the room. "Who-Who's there?" There was no answer but the shadow dissolved.

Perhaps someone was paying them a visit and had walked past the window. Sagar marched out. There was no one outside. The miserable feeling was returning—gradually, annoyingly, alarmingly. He closed the window and rushed upstairs.

After ten steps, the stairs curved. And when Sagar reached the curve, he distinctly felt someone tugging at his shirt. Then an icy cold hand tightened around his, for a brief moment. His hand jerked away instinctively. The stairs were empty. Then who was there? It was all getting so weird. He felt a shiver run down his spine. He shuddered and raced up, covering two steps at a time.

As usual, his mother and wife were busy with dinner preparations. Ankur was playing in a corner. Sagar went to sit on a low wooden stool, wiping his sweaty brows with his shirtsleeve. His mind was troubled. There was someone or something around here, he was sure this time. And, he was the only one who was feeling its presence. Rest of the family was totally unaware of it. Or was it simply his imagination? *What imagination? I wasn't even thinking much when I saw the shadow. And the feeling of someone holding my hand . . . How can I imagine such things?*

Lost in these thoughts, he ate his dinner abstractedly.

"Why are you so quiet today?" Sushma asked.

"Just tired," he responded evasively.

Sagar had a sleepless night. He was worried and frightened. There was no explanation as to why something mysterious was happening around him. But, he couldn't discuss his suspicion with anyone, not even with Sushma. What was the point? Either they would be sceptical or get unnecessarily alarmed.

Monday morning began in low spirits. He tried to be normal but Sushma was quick to notice his fallen face. "Don't go to office if you are unwell," she suggested.

"No, no, I can't stay at home. I am better off in the office."

Sushma glared at him. What kind of statement was that? He had never been so rude. "Why? Do you have any problem staying at home with us?"

"No, Sushma, it is not that. I meant I can't stay at home with so much work lying pending in my office."

But once in office, he couldn't devote even half his attention to work. He remained uneasy and agitated, and at times verbally pounced at his subordinates without reason. He left office very early realizing that if he stayed on, he would be branded the most obnoxious boss.

Arriving at home, he straight away went to bed. Sushma voiced in concern, "You are not well, Sagar. I'll call a doctor."

"There's no need. I just need to sleep and I'll be okay." When he woke up two hours later, he immediately picked up Ankur sleeping next to him, and requested Sushma to follow him upstairs to his parents' rooms. "Let's spend the entire evening with them. We have hardly spent any time with them ever since we've come."

Sushma followed him, frowning at his statement. It wasn't true. They had been spending at least two hours each evening with them. Moreover, Ankur stayed up for at least half a day enjoying his grandparents' indulgence. But, if it made Sagar happy to be upstairs with his parents the entire evening, it was fine with her. Though, she would want a few private moments with Sagar. Ever since they had come to Chamba, he had changed. He used to be so loving and attentive to her needs. She couldn't grasp what had brought such a sudden change in him.

Once upstairs, Sagar became calm and was in a better mood. He even offered to help in the kitchen. He cut vegetables and then sat chatting while his mother and wife cooked meals. He lingered a little longer after dinner. Sushma had to remind him that it was time for the parents to retire, and so should they. Ankur had been asleep on the floor mat and needed to be put to bed.

Though he didn't want to, Sagar got up. Picking up Ankur, he followed Sushma outside. The moment he landed on the ground floor, the uneasy feeling returned. He slept cuddled with Sushma. Her presence was like a blanket of comfort.

For the next couple of days, much to Sagar's relief, nothing untoward happened.

It was the end of December. The mountains had had their first snowfall. Chamba was buried under two feet of snow and reeling in an extreme cold wave. The temperatures plummeted below zero at midnight. On one such shivering cold night, around midnight, Sagar needed to use the toilet. He dilly-dallied for as long as he could. Getting out of the warm quilt was agonizing. *I wonder why the toilet is built outdoors. I must get one built indoors.* He got up in a half asleep state and put on his woollen gown. Slipping his feet into winter slippers

he stepped out.

The white snow blanket glowed silver in the moonlight. The dark branches of the sweet lime tree in the corner of the veranda, now heavy with layers of snow, swayed gently in a mild breeze posing a stark contrast to the still scene around. Sagar put his foot on the first step and froze. A shadow slowly emerged from under the tree. It was a vague outline of a tall, lean man. Or was it just a shadow? Where was the person? He looked around to see if there was someone around whose shadow was falling at that point. The tall stone wall that separated their house from the street obstructed any outside view. The two-leafed main door was shut and locked from inside. There was a straight wall of their neighbour's house behind the shadow. Apart from the moonlight, there was no other light that could have formed the shadow. Whose shadow was it? The shadow was still, watching him intently. Sagar had barely stood there for ten seconds before his sleepy head realized that the shadow had not formed on the ground or the wall. It was in the air, erect and still. Then it began to move towards him. He wanted to run but found his legs frozen. He felt wetness between his legs. When the shadow was barely five feet away, he came to life. Jumping back indoors, he shut the door with a bang. The noise woke Sushma up. She raised her head from the pillow and found Sagar fumbling with the latch. He was shivering violently.

"What's the matter, Sagar? What happened?" She switched on the table lamp.

"Th-there's someone, something outside, in our courtyard," he stuttered.

"Who?"

"I don't know, a shadow . . ."

"Let me see."

"NO, DON'T. THERE IS A GHOST!"

Before Sagar could stop Sushma, she had already opened the door to peep out. "There's nobody out here, Sagar," she declared after a quick scrutiny. But her heart was leaping against her ribs.

"Please shut the door, Sushma. Just shut it," Sagar's voice was frantic. Closing the door, Sushma turned to face Sagar. He was extremely pale, and shaking uncontrollably. She held his hand and led him to their room. "I'll go up and get you a glass of hot milk," she declared.

"No, you aren't going anywhere." Sagar tightened his hold on Sushma's hand and stopped her. "Just stay with me, Sushma. I am scared."

"Scared of what, Sagar?"

"I don't know. Something has been happening ever since we came here. There is something that is bothering me. I have been feeling a presence around me, but today, just now I saw it too."

"Saw what?" Sushma was alarmed.

"Shadow of a man—just a shadow. It moved towards me, came close."

"But I didn't see anything."

"You haven't been feeling anything, but I have."

Sushma shuddered. "Sagar, you are scaring me."

"I am scared too, Sush. I'm the one being targeted. I don't know why! I don't know what to do."

After an eerie silence, Sushma said, "We can't sit over the matter and do nothing. We need help. We will need to consult someone. Let's talk to the temple priest tomorrow. He may have some solution to the problem."

Sagar nodded, a little less agitated. He changed into fresh clothes and got into the bed. Sushma held him in her arms and together they tried to get some sleep.

Sagar took the next day off from work, and right after breakfast they headed for the temple. The priest suggested holding prayers in the house. The following Sunday they organized a *havan* on the ground floor. Sagar's parents were out of station attending a family wedding and that suited the couple. They didn't want them to be alarmed.

The priest prayed for the peace of any wandering troubled spirit that was drifting in the vicinity of the house, admonishing it to leave the realm of the living. Sagar fervently prayed to the unknown to stop troubling him and let him live in peace.

Things improved thereafter. Sagar felt as if a dense cloud of gloom hanging over him had been blown away.

Spring came and cold slowly subsided. Life was now a smooth flowing stream of calm waters. Then one night Sagar had a peculiar dream. The dream took him back to his childhood, to the time when he was a teenage boy of about sixteen.

He was playing a hockey match in Chaugaan. Sagar was the right-back player, and his best friend Shiv was playing from the centre-forward position. It was a tough match, the score was zero-zero, and they all were making an effort to win the match. A group of young girls were watching and cheering their game, and the boys were trying to impress them. He passed the ball to Shiv, who ran with all his might, dodging the opponents, and scored a goal. At the same moment the referee blew the whistle. The match had ended. Sagar and his teammates shouted and jumped in joy. Then Shiv came to him and said, "The match is over. We won. Come, let's go . . ."

Precisely at that moment Sagar woke up. He was sweating as if he had been playing a real match. He smiled to himself. The memory of those good old days had made him feel nostalgic. How beautiful, how carefree were the days of youth! He lay on his back, recalling them. After a few minutes of pondering over his school days, Sagar turned on his side and went off to sleep again.

The next evening, he brought up the topic during his conversation with Sushma. "Sush, many of my childhood friends are probably still here, in Chamba. I want to go to meet them."

"How do you know they all are still here? Their jobs might have taken them to different parts of the country, or maybe abroad."

"You are right, Sush. But some may still be here. Others, I can get to them through their parents. I know where they lived, and like our parents many may still be living in the same houses." He smiled happily. "I have hardly been in touch with my old friends ever since I left Chamba. Though I made new friends in college, but . . ." Sushma noted the faraway look in his eyes; nostalgia dripped through them. "There's a special bond with your school friends— with whom you grew up. I want to re-establish those bonds."

"Sure, Sagar. I understand your longing. Even I miss my school friends so much. God knows where they are now. But we should definitely try to find your friends."

But the coming days were too busy with loads of work at office. Most evenings Sagar came home late from work. Ten days passed thus. Then the dream recurred. The same game of hockey at Chaugaan—the last minute goal by Shiv, joy for having won the match, and then Shiv coming to him and saying, "Come with me, Sagar. Let's go."

Sagar woke up immediately after the dream. He quietly lay thinking about those good old days. He recalled that this was the last match they had played together after finishing high school. A day after this match, results had been declared and all boys had gone their ways for further studies. Sagar had joined a graduate college at Jalandhar and Shiv went to Jammu. They were in touch for a while, but then had slowly drifted apart.

What a wonderful friend Shiv was, Sagar recalled. He remembered how once a vicious player of the opponent team had hit him hard on his ankle with a hockey stick. His ankle had swollen profusely and he had been in terrible pain. Shiv had sat with Sagar throughout the night, talking to him to keep him distracted from the pain, applying ointments. By the morning he had felt much better.

Where was Shiv now? Sagar wondered. His parents used to live in Sapri

Mohulla, behind the Akhand Chandi Palace. They were probably still there. He would go to meet them and also check on Shiv's whereabouts. He must be married by now, and working somewhere.

The following Saturday evening both Sagar and Sushma went to visit Shiv's parents. Sagar had no difficulty in locating the house, although he was visiting it after almost fifteen years. An old wrinkled man opened the door, and then stood peering at the couple, straining his eyes trying to recognize them. "Yes, whom do you want to see?"

"Well, actually I have come to meet Shiv. I am an old friend. We used to study together in school. Is he still here in Chamba, or has he shifted out?" Sagar shuffled his feet and the old man further narrowed his eyes, gazing at him, examining him from top to bottom.

"Who are you?" he asked after a gap of half a minute.

"I am—"

"Wait a minute, aren't you Sagar?" He hesitated. "Or . . . Am I mistaken? My eyes have grown old and weak . . ." The old man smiled faintly.

"You are absolutely right, Uncle. I am indeed Sagar."

The old man nodded his head and beckoned the couple, "Come in, come in, what a pleasant surprise. In fact, my wife and I were talking about you just yesterday . . ."

The small sitting room hadn't changed at all. The same maroon sofa, two wooden chairs with straight backs, rectangular central table . . . Even the same maroon- and beige-striped curtains were the same, though now faded and at places stitched roughly to mend the torn portions. Nothing had changed. To Sagar it seemed that time had stood still here, in this small house. A forty watts bulb spread a dim, gloomy light in the room, and Sagar shivered in the cold as he sat on the sofa. Sushma sat next to him, feeling equally uncomfortable.

An old woman, grey-haired and bent with age, entered the room to greet the guests. "Who are these young people?" she asked and waited for her husband to introduce them.

"Do you remember Sagar, Shiv's friend? See how much he has changed."

"Oh my God! Shiv's friend, Sagar?" The old woman rushed to embrace Sagar. She wrapped her arms so tightly around him that he felt suffocated. Then she fell into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably. Her shoulders shook with sobs and deep moans escaped her lips. Sushma and Sagar were puzzled at her conduct. The old man shut his eyes tightly. Two drops of tears escaped them and he wiped them with the back of his hand. After a few minutes, he got up, walked to the sofa, and gently led his wife away to make her sit on a chair.

"Beta, do not mind her behaviour. She is a broken woman ever since she

lost her only child—our Shiv."

"What?" Sagar almost jumped out of his seat.

"Yes, Beta, we lost Shiv in a bus accident. It's been almost a year now."

"Oh my God! I didn't know about it at all."

"The news of the accident was all over in the national and local papers. Ten people had died in that accident. Our Shiv was one of the unlucky ten."

"I think I read about the accident. But had no idea about Shiv . . ."

Shiv's mother sighed. Her voice was choking when she spoke. "He had come to visit us for two weeks. We had fixed his marriage to a lovely girl. He had promised to come again after two months for a formal engagement. But it wasn't meant to be." Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "The bus by which he was returning to work fell into a two hundred feet deep gorge." A painful sigh escaped her lips.

Sagar was stunned. He didn't know how to console the poor parents. He couldn't imagine the pain they were going through. And he hadn't even known about the tragedy that had shattered their lives. He should have come to console them earlier.

"Both of us are dead too, from inside . . ." Shiv's father spoke, looking at his distraught wife.

"And he was so attached to you, Sagar." Shiv's mother sighed. "There was this time, a few years ago—we were attending a family wedding at Dalhousie. Someone asked Shiv if he felt lonely, being the only child. Without batting an eye, he had said, 'I have a brother, Sagar, so how can I be lonely?'"

Sagar had tears in his eyes. He had no idea about the strong feelings Shiv had for him. Yes, Shiv had been a special friend, but that was all. Even Kishore, another schoolmate, was an equally close friend of his.

Shiv's father continued, "That fateful day before he left, he was talking about you. 'I wonder where's Sagar now,' he had said. 'I miss him so much. I haven't had a friend like him ever since we separated. But I will visit his parents and check on him. I'll dig him out from wherever he is hiding. He has to attend my wedding." The old lady sighed and continued, "How much he loved you, Sagar. You were like the brother he never had."

All the discussions that evening were centred on the deceased. Sagar and Sushma stayed with Shiv's parents for as long as they could. Promising to visit them often, Sagar and Sushma returned home in very low spirits. Sagar was silent throughout their walk back home. The shock of the death of a friend in the prime of his life had left him stunned.

That night Shiv was back in Sagar's dream. The same dream—the same scene of the hockey match in Chaugaan—and at the end of which Shiv once again came to Sagar and asked him to go with him. This time he even held his

arm to pull him along and that was the time Sagar woke up with a start. He was sweating profusely. *This is odd. Why is the same dream repeating with precision, and so often?*

The following day was a holiday. After breakfast, Sagar and Sushma sat with their parents on the first floor veranda, basking in the sun. It was then that Sagar broke the news of Shiv's demise to his parents.

Sagar's father instantly responded, "We know about that terrible accident. Two people we knew had died in the accident, Shiv and my distant cousin Roshan. Do you remember Roshan?"

"Why didn't you tell me about it earlier?" Sagar asked, annoyed.

"It never occurred to me that you would be interested. Frankly, I had forgotten about it."

"Dad, Shiv was a very good friend. I felt foolish going to his house without knowing that he had died in an accident."

"I know he was your good friend, but then you have hardly been in touch with him. At least, I haven't heard you mention him for a long time."

That silenced Sagar. His father was right. He had become so busy in life that he had completely neglected remaining in touch with his old friends.

Sagar sat with his head bowed. "Shiv has been visiting me in my dreams. Often," he declared gently.

Though the statement was made casually, it had the opposite effect. Everyone looked at him in concern. "Visiting you in your dreams? What do you mean?" His mother couldn't mask her alarm.

"I keep dreaming of him time and again. And the strange part is that it is the same dream each time—of us playing that last match of hockey that we had won just before joining college, at the end of which Shiv tells me to go with him."

"Go with him? Where?" Sushma's eyes widened in horror.

"I don't know. He simply asks me to go with him and then I wake up."

"Sagar, I need to buy fruits to make juice for Ankur. Let's go now, so that we can be back before lunch." Sushma got up in a huff, and after picking up Ankur she strode towards the stairs. Sagar stared at her receding back. What was wrong with her? Getting up thus in the middle of a serious discussion. But, left with no choice, he followed her. Feeling disgruntled, his parents watched them go.

"What happened to Sushma? Why did she run away in the middle of the discussion?" Sagar's mother queried, more to herself.

Sagar's father was clearly displeased. "Strange! The subject is serious and needs to be probed further. He hasn't been himself lately. Haven't you noticed?"

When Sagar reached the foot of the staircase, Sushma had already fetched her purse and was waiting near the main gate. Seeing Sagar come towards her, she quickly walked out, expecting him to follow. "Why are you in such a hurry, Sush?" But Sushma was trotting away in urgency and Sagar had to run to keep up with her. "Where are you running away to? The fruit shops are not going to close for another eight hours. What's the hurry?"

"Sagar, I'm not going to buy fruits. I am going to see the priest. We need his advice urgently. And why didn't you tell me about the dream earlier?"

"What's the great deal about a simple dream? Don't we dream every night?'

"No, Sagar, it is different. Nobody sees the same dream time and again. I think it is very serious. It could be a part of the uncanny experiences you have been undergoing ever since we came here."

Sagar walked silently for a while, pondering. "You know, I didn't think much of the dream till yesterday. It troubled me only last night, since I had come to know that Shiv has been dead for many months."

The priest patiently listened to Sagar with concern. Then he counselled, "When somebody dies young, and violently, at times the spirit remains hovering around trying to meet its unfulfilled desires." Sagar nodded. "This appears the case this time. All you need to do is to counter the dream."

"Counter the dream? How can that be done?" Sagar looked at the priest cynically.

"You will need to develop a strong willpower. Every night, meditate and pray before sleeping. The next time the dream comes tell the deceased man to go his way. Tell him strongly that you do not intend to go with him because your ways are now different."

"But it is a dream, not a coffee-table conservation," Sagar couldn't restrain his derision.

"I know that, young man. But the mind is a very powerful thing that we carry inside our skulls. Apart from what we feel and see through our conscious mind, there is an equally strong subconscious. If you repeatedly tell yourself something, it may get lodged in your subconscious and then even in your sleep state, you can control your mind."

"Please explain to me exactly what I have to do."

"Very simple. Just pray regularly, and before falling asleep repeat the lines you have to tell the dead entity in your dream."

"That's all? Will it work?"

"It may not work immediately, but you will have to strengthen your willpower. Eventually, I believe, it will work."

"I hope!"

Sagar and Sushma returned home in better spirits. "The priest has given such an easy solution to the tough problem," Sushma endorsed.

That night Sagar followed the priest's directive before sleeping and after meditation and prayers, repeated the lines he wanted to speak in his dream to counter the inimical proposal. Sure enough the dream was repeated that night. When the time came to leave the field and Shiv came to him, Sagar wriggled in discomfort. He couldn't say a word but his body language very clearly protested the offer.

"I am lonely, Sagar—please come with me." Suddenly Shiv was no more a young boy but a full-grown man, like the one he had seen in a picture at his parents' house. The transition shocked Sagar even in his dream and he squirmed and moaned in distress, which woke up Sushma.

"Sagar, wake up," she shook him, "wake up, Sagar." The expression on Sagar's face startled her. Slowly Sagar opened his eyes. 'Where is he? Has he gone?'

"Who? Who was here?" Sushma blurted.

"Shiv. He looks so different now."

"Looks different now? What do you mean?"

By now Sagar was fully awake. He looked around frantically and then his gaze slowly came to rest on Sushma. "Shiv is no more a young boy. He's a grown man."

"Of course, he was a grown man, Sagar."

"When I last met him, he was a young boy. But I saw him as a man just now."

Sushma was frightened by this conversation. She peered in the dark of the night to see if there really was someone around. "Where did you see him?"

"In my dream."

"Did you tell him to go away?"

"No, not really. But I was trying to squirm out of his grip."

"Sagar, you need to strengthen your willpower." Sushma shivered and slipped close to Sagar. She was getting terribly distressed. Why were such strange events occurring in their life? Why was Sagar undergoing such a weird experience? Till they hadn't shifted to Chamba, life had been running smoothly, without any hassles. For the first time, Sushma felt it was a mistake to accept this posting, despite the fact that Sagar's parents had been so happy to have them here. They were old and leading a lonely life. Yet, she now wanted to leave this place and go elsewhere. She would by and by convince Sagar to take a transfer, she decided.

Shiv returned in Sagar's dream two days later. This time there was no replay of the hockey match. Shiv was simply standing at a door, as a grown-up, smiling and beckoning Sagar. "Come with me," he said. Sagar wanted to avoid him and in his dream, he tried turning away. But whichever way he went, a door appeared in front of him. A faint light was coming through the door and Shiv was standing in the middle with an extended hand, calling him to come to him. Finally, Sagar collected his strength and blurted loudly, "I can't come with you. You go your way."

The loud declaration woke Sushma up. Sagar was sitting, his face dripping with sweat. "Bravo, Sagar. You did it."

"I did what?"

"You told Shiv to go his way, exactly the way the priest had advised."

"Yes, I think I did." Sagar took a deep breath and feeling pleased, wrapped his arms around Sushma. They both remained awake for a while, waiting in silence, as if there would be some repercussion to the bold action taken in the dream. The night remained still and calm. A dog whined in the distance. Some scraping sound was heard from an adjacent roof, like the claws of a roosting bird brazing against the slate. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Soon the couple, cosy in each other's arms and comforted by each other's presence, drifted into an undisturbed sleep.

The dreams stopped. There were none in the coming week. It was an alleged victory, a tough battle won at last. Sagar's parents remained in the dark to the happenings all this while.

On the following Sunday, when they were once again enjoying a free relaxed time, Sagar's father raised the topic.

"Sagar, are you still having those bizarre dreams? I mean . . ."

"No, Dad, I am fine. It must have been some passing phase. Since I have come to stay in my hometown after a very long time, perhaps old memories flooded my mind and triggered strange dreams."

"Quite possible."

Sushma nodded her head ardently endorsing the statement. This was a very satisfying and comfortable explanation. Perhaps, they were unnecessarily making a mountain out of a molehill.

This logic helped Sagar more than anybody else. He was getting pointlessly worked up, getting drawn into something non-existent. With this rationality, peace returned to his mind and life. The eerie incidents began to take a backseat, slowly filtering out of his mind. He concentrated on his work with more ease.

The beginning of April brought a number of festivals and holidays. Ram Naomi followed by Good Friday added to the long weekend. One evening Sagar suggested that they needed to keep up their promise and go to visit Shiv's parents. It was much after their evening tea that the idea had cropped up. Sushma was a bit hesitant. "Sagar, it's too late. I need to help Ma ji in the kitchen. I won't be comfortable letting her cook dinner all by herself."

Sagar instantly hollered at his mother who was at that moment in her bedroom. "Ma, do you need Sush's help tonight or can she be spared? We were thinking of visiting Shiv's parents."

"No, no, I don't need help. You both can go and have a nice evening. Leave Ankur with us. We'll look after him."

The evening was beautiful. After the intense winter cold, the warm weather was like a rainbow following a storm. They both walked leisurely through the narrow cobbled lanes of Chamba. At the end of Bangotu Mohulla, they reached the intersection from which branched out a number of streets including the one that bypassed Akhand Chandi Palace and went down through a steep sloping alley to Chaugaan. Another lane led to the famous Laxmi Narayan Temple. Sagar halted here. Old memories invaded his mind all of a sudden. He used to visit the temple almost daily during his childhood with his mother, carrying her plate of diyas made of kneaded flour and homemade wicks burning in ghee. Later he often visited the temple with his friends. With Shiv. How and when those beautiful childhood days had vanished, life hadn't even given him enough spare time to think. A pain now shot in his heart, filling him with nostalgia.

There was a large *peepal* tree at this juncture, with a cemented stockade around it. A lone man sat on it—a sad figure, his back slumped, head bowed. As Sagar and Sushma passed by the peepal tree, Sagar threw a glance at him. The young man raised his head. He seemed familiar. Where had he seen him? After a few more steps Sagar turned to look back. Perhaps he knew the man and should have greeted him. But, there was no one there. Within seconds the man had disappeared. Sagar went pale. Didn't he resemble the man from his dreams? He walked on quietly. Sushma noted his pale, disturbed face but stopped short of probing him.

Dusk had set in by the time they reached Shiv's parent's house at the far end of the narrow street. A weak bulb on a tall lamppost illuminated the street softly. There was complete silence around. Not a soul could be spotted. A disquieting sensation encased both Sagar and Sushma, leaving them sad. On reaching the house, they were disappointed to see a large lock hanging on the door of the house. "Should we wait for their return? They couldn't have gone

far, perhaps only to fetch provisions . . .” Sagar suggested.

“How do we know, Sagar? They could have gone visiting friends. For how long will we wait? Ankur may get cranky if we don’t get home soon. Let’s go back.”

“Okay, Madam, as you say.” Holding Sushma’s hand in his, Sagar began walking back. When they reached the end of the street, they both heard a male voice from behind, clear and crisp, “Sagar, wait.”

“Shiv’s parents are back,” Sagar declared cheerfully and turned back. They both once again walked back to the house. Sushma felt a little uneasy since she couldn’t spot anyone in the street. This side of the town was unusually deserted today, unlike the rest of the town.

They were once again standing in front of the same doorstep, but the big lock still hung there. Prominently and coldly.

“Who called out your name?” Sushma looked around anxiously, fear creeping into her bones.

Sagar nervously shrugged his shoulders. They hurriedly retreated their steps and moved away from the house.

Once back home, they decided to ignore the weird experiences of the evening, although, their hearts remained uneasy. In fact, for the next two days that Sagar was at home, he felt listless and gloomy. As much as he tried, he couldn’t perceive what really was wrong.

With the holidays over, Sagar returned to his work more ardently. As a Divisional Officer of the district he was required to undertake intense touring to inspect the projects underway. It was time to begin. After his first major staff meeting, a few matters cropped up which required his immediate attention. He needed to visit some far off and higher regions in the district but most of them were still under a thick cover of snow. June would be better for touring those places. Also, there were quite a few complaints of the slow progress of work in the sub-division of Tissa. Sagar decided he would begin by travelling to this small settlement about sixty-three kilometres north of Chamba town. That wasn’t far but it would take somewhere about three hours to reach since it was a rough, jagged, mountainous road. He fixed the second Tuesday of May for his tour to Tissa.

On that Monday of May, he returned home a little early to pack for the tour that he was going on the next morning. Ankur was delighted to see his father back early and demanded his attention. Sagar readily obliged. He knew Ankur was going to miss him since he was going to be away after a very long

time. He smiled thinking how he would pester Sushma frequently with the same question—'When is Papa coming home?' With love copiously pouring out of his heart, he picked and hugged Ankur. "No, Papa, no hugs. I want to play cricket with you."

"Okay, champion boss, get your cricket set."

Ankur ran to fetch his small bat and ball. They played cricket in the courtyard. After half an hour of shouting, running, arguing, and mirth, Sushma took a protesting Ankur away for his evening glass of milk and Sagar went inside to pack.

It took him barely ten minutes to pack a small suitcase he would take with him on his two-day trip. Packing over, he sat down to go through his official files. The twilight gradually faded making way for the nightly shadows. Sagar realized it only when his eyes began to be strained. He needed to switch on the light but he sat limp and still, shivering in the sudden unexplained cold. Depression slowly engulfed his whole body. He was thus sitting in the dark, lost and immobile, when Sushma came down to check on him. "Are you all right, Sagar?" she asked with concern, switching on the light and wrapping her arms around him.

Sagar jumped out of his reverie. "I am . . . fine." He looked around as if he was in completely new surroundings. "I must have dozed off, was dreaming of a strange place . . ." Running his hand through his hair, he stood up.

"Let's go up. Dinner is ready," Sushma held his hand.

Sagar docilely followed her. "I don't know why I don't feel too well," he confessed, climbing up the stairs.

"You must sleep early. You have a long day tomorrow. Or, on second thought, maybe you should postpone your tour."

"No, it's better I get done with it."

Once in the kitchen, Sagar sat next to the open window. As usual, he felt much better up here. The cool breeze was refreshing. He could see Chaugaan and the bazaar illuminated in different shades of lights. It looked so different from his childhood days when the houses would be mutely lighted with earthen oil lamps. The darkness of the night then would be so utterly blatant and enchanting. Yet, like any child he would yearn for daylight when he could play with his friends. Studies always came secondary. Sagar smiled at the thought. He mentioned it to Sushma who made a face. "I wouldn't want that for Ankur. Would you?"

"Maybe not. But he will definitely be allowed a lot of playtime. Always," Sagar declared merrily and then suddenly stiffened. Blood drained from his face.

Sagar's father was sitting with Ankur on the mat, both playing some

childish games. His mother was pouring curries into small bowls to serve dinner to everyone. Sushma was laying the plates when she stopped midway in response to Sagar's reaction and found him gazing at something outside. She left her work to join Sagar at the window.

"What's wrong, Sagar?" she whispered.

"See that person standing at the main gate. He's looking up, at me. I . . . I've seen him a number of times . . . It's the same shadow . . ." Sagar was shivering.

Sushma was startled. The main gate was wide open. They might have forgotten to slip the bolt today. But the door was shut when they came up. Who opened it? Was it because of the wind? Only a light breeze was blowing at the moment. The door panels were heavy, made of solid walnut wood. "Sagar, I see no one," Sushma peered into the muted light with narrowed eyes.

"Can't you see that shadow—on the side—standing on the first step?" he whispered nervously.

Sushma stuck her face out of the window to scrutinize intently but she didn't particularly see anybody. Then she felt a faint movement as if something had moved. It was too faint, like a faded shadow of a large bird flying overhead. She shrugged. 'I don't think there is anybody there," she declared even though her heart was racing. Perhaps Sagar had been right all this time. There was definitely someone there. She quickly withdrew from the window.

"He's gone now," Sagar articulated in a spooky whisper. Sushma glanced at him and immediately knew that Sagar had recognized the man, the spectre. It made her uneasy. "Come Sagar, let's eat," Sushma tried to distract him.

"I forgot to close the main gate."

"Then do it now, before we sit down to eat," his father directed.

Sagar didn't respond. Neither did he budge from his seat. He was obviously extremely reluctant to go down.

"I would've done it, but climbing down and then up the two flights will take me so much more time. Food will be cold by the time I finish," his father remarked, still waiting for Sagar to do what he asked for.

"What's the hurry? When we go down to sleep, I'll shut it," Sushma proposed.

"Our town doesn't have thieves or criminals, so it doesn't matter if the door is shut now or later," Sagar's mother rested the matter, and the family sat to have their meal together.

The family retired for the night immediately after dinner. Sagar walked to the entrance door and lingered there longer than necessary. He had clearly

seen the shadow here, whereas Sushma had seen nothing. Had it been his imagination? But he had not been imagining anything at that moment. He had been admiring the beauty of Chamba at night. He shook his head to discard the fearful doubt from his mind. He was starting the journey at eight in the morning, and decided to immediately go to bed.

The morning sky was overcast with heavy dark clouds. Sagar woke up to a distant rumbling of the approaching thunderstorm. He felt disturbed and restless. The roads were ragged, and it was going to be even worse if it rained. Should he postpone the tour? But then his staff was waiting for him at Tissa.

He hadn't even been able to sleep well last night. Ever since he had come to live here, he had always slept fitfully. This was draining him out. "Sush, I am thinking that once I return from my tour, we'll shift to the first floor," he announced as Sushma brought him his breakfast.

"But there's not enough room there, Sagar. Only one spare bedroom. What about our baby's nursery?"

"Sush, we'll convert the small study room into our children's room. I don't feel good staying down here anymore."

"We'll discuss it after you come back. Right now, I need to rush to pack your lunch."

"Could you please pack some extra, for my assistant? He's going with me. He's a bachelor, and I doubt he'll bother to cook for himself early in the morning."

"Sure. Finish your breakfast. Your jeep will be here soon."

At dot five minutes to eight, the peon arrived to take Sagar's luggage. The vehicle was parked a little distance away, since it could not be brought at the doorstep. The street was too narrow. "I'll run up to say bye to Ma and Dad," Sagar announced. But he didn't have to. They both had walked down to send him off. After quick hugs and leave-taking, Sagar walked out. His family stood on the steps outside the entrance, bidding him goodbye.

"Daddy, come back soon," Ankur called out in his half-sleepy tone.

"Sagar, I'll miss you," Sushma added.

"Take care, beta," the parents said.

Sagar turned and gave one last affectionate nod and a tender smile to his family. He loved them all so much!

They all watched him tenderly till he disappeared around the curve.

Sagar came home the next day—but only as a lifeless body on a stretcher, wrapped in a blood-stained white sheet. All that had remained of him was a

bloodied tangled mass—his spirit had been freed from the body.

His jeep had rolled down two hundred feet deep into a gorge, thirty miles beyond Chamba. His assistant too had died in the accident, though the driver and the peon had miraculously survived. They both had managed to jump out of the vehicle in the nick of time, just as the jeep had begun to roll down the steep hill.

Two days later, shaken and distraught, the driver of the ill-fated jeep, also named Shiv Kumar, came to Sushma to express his remorse. Wrapped in a white sari, her eyes stony and distant, her mind unaccepting the fact that Sagar was never coming back to her, Sushma seemed like a crumpled young twig lying on a cold lonely path. Shiv Kumar stood next to her, feeling immensely guilty.

"Memsahib, I'm devastated, have not been able to sleep a wink since the accident. I don't understand what happened that day. It's all so weird. And after I jumped out of the vehicle, I helplessly watched the jeep roll down with Sahib in it. I panicked, tried running downhill after it, but after a few steps the mountain was too steep. By then the jeep had rolled so far down, that I couldn't even see it. I couldn't help Sahib . . ." A sob escaped his lips. "I became hysteric. The villagers working on their fields heard my screams and rushed to help us. But what could they do. The hill wall was straight, the jeep was too deep down for them to retrieve, or help the passengers who had gone down with it."

Sushma whispered haltingly, through her dry painful throat, "Then who brought Sagar up from the ravine?"

"The village postmaster called for help. Almost after two hours of wait a few army soldiers arrived, with ropes and material to climb down the steep mountain."

Sushma glanced at her little fatherless child restless in his sleep, his cheeks stained with tears. She wiped her tears with the corner of her sari. The leaves of the lime tree rustled in the midday breeze. Shiv Kumar controlled his moans and sighed. "Memsahib, I heard a soldier say to another, 'This is an ill-fated spot. Isn't this the exact spot where a state transport bus had rolled down last year? Remember, we had retrieved ten dead bodies then?'" He shuddered, but failed to notice Sushma's sudden reaction. "I was left aghast. Unbelievable, Memsahib! The same soldiers had retrieved ten bodies from the same spot a year ago. Can you believe it?"

Sushma gaped at him, open-mouthed. Her dilated eyes exuded pure fear and alarm. Shiv Kumar now looked at her and couldn't comprehend her unexpected reaction. He went on, "Memsahib, I don't even remember clearly

about the accident; it was so sudden. I was driving around a curve, and, and I don't know if the brakes failed, or . . . All I remember is that I was desperately trying to turn the steering wheel and it just wouldn't. It had got jammed. I kept hitting the break but the jeep went straight down the hill." The distraught man sniffled. "It's not normal, not normal at all!" He shook his head. "I have driven vehicles for almost twenty-five years now, ever since I got a license at twenty. I am a very careful driver, never drive rashly. But, but this time I just can't explain." Sushma slumped on a chair. Tears were openly flowing down her tightly shut eyes. She was visibly trembling. Shiv Kumar lowered his eyes. "And, and I am going back home now, to do farming. No more driving for me."

A sudden heart-rending wail from the upper floor raved through the air. The bereaved mother's cry hit the traumatized man like a thunderbolt. He collapsed on his haunches next to the chair and sobbed like a child. "I can't face Sahib's parents. What will I say to them? I have broken their hearts. I have crushed you all, Memsahib, crushed you all." He wept openly. Sushma remained motionless. "Memsahib, I'm sorry. I beg you to forgive me. It wasn't my fault," Shiv Kumar spoke through his sobs and buried his face in his hands.

Sushma slowly opened her eyes and stared at Shiv's slumped back shaking with sobs. A large painful lump in her throat choked her. She shifted her gaze to the steps on the main door, now open wide to allow people to visit them to offer their condolences. There was a profound loneliness beyond. "Of course, Shiv, it wasn't your fault. Not at all," she turned towards him and whispered through her pain.

From the corner of her eye, Sushma noted some movement on the steps. Was there a visitor? Instinctively her glance returned to the open door. She froze. Two hazy ghostly figures stood on the top step of the door, holding hands. Horrified, she watched one figure slowly raise its hand towards her . . . beckoning her.

PART 2

Death, time, space
None can restrain
The wandering souls
Bound by the past's chains

THE THIRD HOUSEMATE

The change in weather was sudden. It had been a crisp, clear sky throughout the day. Hot bright May sun had been pounding on the city and its people. And then around seven in the evening, a storm and heavy showers brought respite from the torturous heat of Delhi's summer—and with it began a series of strange events.

Nidhi returned home from her office around six-thirty, tired and hungry. It had been one of the most hectic days at work. She had been on her toes almost the entire day. She removed her shoes and walked barefoot on the cemented floor of the house. It gave some relief to her aching feet.

She could hear clanking sounds in the kitchen. Manisha, her younger sister, was getting a cup of tea ready for her. *What a blessing! Mani has managed quite a bit of setting up of the house. Good use of her day off.* Nidhi looked around with a gratified smile and plonked her bottom on an easy chair. *After a cup of tea, I am going to rest. I'm too tired to do anything today. Hopefully, Mani has got dinner ready too. If not, then we'll eat sandwiches or order food. I've no energy to cook and probably Mani is worn out too.* She massaged her swollen feet to ease her pain.

Nidhi worked as the manager at a telecom company. Manisha had freshly joined an export company as its designer. The sisters had shifted to this house just two days ago. It was not easy to set up a house all over again, but they wanted to live in a better locality. The previous neighbourhood was noisy and congested. Moreover, they had got this accommodation in Anand Lok at a very reasonable rent—less than the previous one. It was a real windfall to be able to live in one of the greenest areas of South Delhi.

Yesterday, Nidhi had taken the day off to shift to this new house. But that was all she could manage with loads of work in the office piling up in her

absence. Manisha had taken two days off.

Manisha walked into their sitting room with a tray. Two steaming cups of tea and a plate of cookies were temptingly resting on the tray. Nidhi's hunger erupted like a fountain. "What do we have for dinner, Mani?" she asked, popping a large piece of cookie into her mouth.

"Khichdi," Manisha replied with a frown and took a sip of her masala tea. Having spent two days setting up the house all on her own, without much help from her sister, she was feeling out of sorts and worn out.

"Will do." Nidhi sat back to enjoy her tea.

"And there's another good news. This house is infested with mice."

"Oueee," Nidhi suddenly and instinctively raised up her feet. "Did you see any?" She was incredibly frightened of mice.

"No, but the whole day there were scurrying noises—sometimes from right behind me. I think the mice here are very daring. The moment I would turn they would disappear, faster than my eye could catch." But the sound that came now from the kitchen was sudden and startling. Manisha sat up with a jerk. Something had been dragged. The dustbin? The frown on her brows became deeper. She could see a part of the kitchen from her position. Had she noticed a movement there? A shadow? Large, not at all like of a scurrying mouse. She got up and strode into the kitchen to check. Nidhi followed her. The dustbin lay toppled, the garbage scattered. "Oh my God. Now this increased work! We need to buy a mousetrap immediately. They are big jungli rats, not small mice." Manisha gazed at the mess in utter disgust.

Nidhi shrugged, walked out of the kitchen, picked up her cup of tea and strode out to the terrace. From the rooftop she could see clouds that had gathered at the horizon. A cooler breeze had begun to blow. A shadow dashed past her and seemingly dived down towards the ground. She looked up and then around. Whose shadow was it? There had to be a big bird, flying close by. Why couldn't she spot any?

Manisha joined her. She would clean the mess later, she decided. She loved her tea piping hot. Traces of frown were still lingering on her face; the mystery behind the mess bothered her. How could rats topple a bin heavy with all that garbage? She noted Nidhi hanging over the railing and peeping down. "What are you trying to do, Didi? Jump down and commit suicide?"

"No, something big flew past. I am trying to locate it."

"Something big? You saw it?"

"No, just its shadow . . ."

Manisha drew in her breath. Again a shadow? Big one? she wondered.

A sudden violent draught of cold breeze took them by surprise. A swarm of dark thunderclouds were fiercely invading the city's firmament. Lightening

lit up the darkening sky in flashes of explosions, rumbling thunder trailed. The intensity of wind increased to turn into a squall. In no time, a full storm was blowing. Both the sisters had finished their tea but continued standing on the terrace, enjoying the cool blasts. Manisha winced and rubbed her eyes. "Didi, let's go inside. I am getting dust in my eyes. Moreover, it's going to rain."

"Close your eyes and enjoy the cool breeze a little more—a rarity of summers."

"Cool breeze, eh sis, this is a hurricane . . ." But Nidhi wasn't listening to her. Her attention was completely diverted. She had a strange feeling that someone had just walked past her, brushed against her. She peered through the air that had gone hazy with dust. The whole terrace was empty except for the two of them. "Okay, let's go inside," she declared and with long quick strides walked towards the door without waiting for Manisha, who however, followed her instantly. She too had felt an unexplained uneasiness. It was the second time she had had that feeling today. She had this peculiar feeling of someone being around, watching her, when she was alone in the kitchen in the afternoon.

Nidhi was already inside when Manisha grabbed the doorknob to close the door. She could feel the force of the wind as she pulled the door inward to close it. It was only half closed when a huge piece of glass came flying and hit the edge of the door, barely inches away from her head. She instantly ducked. If she hadn't, she would have surely landed in a hospital with a serious head injury. The glass piece fell on the floor and shattered into thousands of tiny splinters. Manisha shut the door in haste.

Nidhi stood aghast. It had been a narrow escape. A few seconds' delay in reaching the door and the glass would have crashed against her sister's head. What providence! Manisha was safe. She blew out in relief.

"My God, what a storm! It could even lift a huge pane," Manisha remarked. The room suddenly plunged into darkness. She grabbed her mobile phone lying on the side table and switched it on with her unsteady hands. The narrow escape had rendered her nervous. Nidhi opened the drawer where she had kept a box of candles the previous day. She walked into the kitchen to fetch a box of matchsticks to light the candle. As she began to open the box, she heard shuffling noises. For a few seconds, she just stood still. *Must be mice, as Manisha had mentioned.* Nidhi tried to overcome the fear that was invading her. She picked up the matchbox and rushed out.

When she returned Manisha was sitting on a chair with her face between her palms, thinking. "A heavy piece of glass, carried three floors up from the ground? Not possible. The storm is not that violent!" she contemplated loudly.

"Of course, silly, it hasn't come from the ground. Only a tornado can lift up things like this and this isn't a tornado. Maybe the glass piece came from someone's house." Nidhi got busy fixing the candle in the stand.

"Whose house?"

Nidhi's hand froze in the air. She looked towards the window. Manisha followed suit. Although nothing was visible through the curtained window, they both knew that their house was the last house in the lane. There was only a boulevard beyond, lined on both sides with dense rows of neem and peepal trees.

"I wonder where that glass came from," Nidhi murmured, her voice lost in the loud sound of rain pounding on their roof and the terrace. She carefully fixed the candle in the stand and sat on a chair. All of a sudden the stand toppled and fell on the table with a force. It was such a sudden movement that both of them were taken aback. It was only when the tablecloth began to emit smoke that Nidhi reacted. She was quick to bring down a book on the burning candle and the smouldering tablecloth. "What is happening tonight, Didi? There was no storm inside to topple it." Manisha was staring at the black hole in their new tablecloth. They sat appalled in the silence till the electric current was restored after fifteen minutes.

"I'll fix dinner and the mess in the kitchen," Manisha declared. "The outside mess can be left till tomorrow for the cleaning lady." She then halted at the kitchen door to assert, "Remember, Didi, don't walk out barefoot till the place is cleaned."

Nidhi nodded and stretched on the bed. She switched on the TV but there was no satellite transmission due to the stormy weather. She turned on the songs stored in her mobile phone and closed her eyes. The tiredness overtook her immediately and she dozed off. She had no idea for how long she slept—fifteen minutes or an hour. In her sleep someone called out her name. She responded by slowly walking towards the terrace door in a trance-like state. She opened the door. A young man stood outside. "Nidhi, why have you come to live in my apartment?" The man's voice sounded cold. The pressure cooker whistle sounded from the kitchen just then and woke her up. She slowly sat up. It was still raining outside though the storm had subsided. *What kind of dream was that? It seemed so real.* She rubbed her eyes and looked at the kitchen door. Someone seemed to have entered it suddenly. She didn't really see anyone, just had a fleeting glimpse.

"Mani, are you in the kitchen?" Nidhi inquired from her bed, making no effort to get off it. She was still tired. The nap didn't seem to have helped.

"Obviously," Manisha's irritation was apparent.

She is not complaining, but she is pissed. Nidhi got up and walked into the

kitchen. "Thanks for getting the food ready, Mani. I should have helped you but the day was so tiring . . ."

"It's all right, Didi. I haven't made a huge effort to get dinner ready. It has taken me just ten minutes. I know you are tired. I saw you sleeping so deeply and didn't want to wake you up. Thought I'd do that once the food was ready."

"You came into the room and then walked into the kitchen just now, didn't you? I saw . . ."

"No, Didi, I have been in the kitchen for the past ten minutes. Never left it for a second. And I'm not joking, I swear."

"But, but I saw someone walking into the kitchen. I swear I did."

"You are hallucinating," Manisha scoffed, but she was getting bothered. Something strange was going on here. Her hunch was getting stronger. They ate dinner in a distressing silence.

When they finally switched off the light to sleep, both were feeling unsettled.

The following week, things became worse. The sisters would often hear unexplained noises in the house—from the kitchen, from the bathroom, from the bedroom. They were restrained, subdued, furtive sounds. Sometimes, when they returned home in the evening they found things shifted from their original place. They would then reluctantly blame their memory and overlook the goings-on. They had already paid a non-refundable rent for three months on the landlady's insistence.

It was after about a fortnight of their stay in their new house, fortnight of getting used to the mysterious happenings, that Manisha was to go to Singapore on an official tour for a week. Nidhi would be alone in the house for the first time since they had shifted here. She was uneasy about it. It was not the first time in her life that she would be staying alone. She was used to it. She had lived all by herself for a year before Manisha had joined her. Yet the overpowering feeling that someone was around, the sneaky unexplained sounds, were things she had never experienced before. A number of times she had suddenly looked up from her book to check on, she didn't really know what. But the feeling of someone being there would be very strong at such times. So the fact that she would be alone for a week was making her nervous.

She went to drop Manisha at the airport. "I don't know why, Didi, but I'm very apprehensive leaving you alone this time. I wouldn't have gone if the visit weren't important. Be very careful." Manisha stood shuffling her feet. "On second thought, why don't you shift with Renu Auntie for a week? I would be at ease knowing you aren't alone."

"Don't worry, Mani. I'll be fine. You finish your work and come back fast." Nidhi smiled, pretending to be bolder than she really was. Bidding her sister goodbye, she picked up a pizza on her way back. She would eat, watch a bit of TV, and then sleep early. She was to leave for office latest by eight the next morning. She had called a meeting of her team at nine.

With her mind on these plans Nidhi reached home and opened the door. It was pretty dark inside. *The light switch is at such a wrong place. In no other house have I ever had to cross the entire room to get to it. I must remember to call the electrician the coming weekend and get it fixed next to the entrance,* she reflected as she bolted the door. She checked the latch again and walked into the room. The curtains were not drawn. Dim light from a faraway street lamp fell into the room. The same light faintly lighted up the terrace too. She had reached the middle of the room when she froze.

Who is the man? What's he doing on my terrace? The only access to the terrace is from our sitting room. The house was locked. It wasn't even broken into. How did he get there?

Nidhi stood still, her heart racing. She was alone. What was she to do now? Should she get out of the house fast? But where would she go? What if the intruder followed her? Had the person come to know that she was inside the room? She had made some loud careless sounds while opening the door.

She saw the person turning his head. He was directly looking at her. Was she visible to him in this practically dark room? She stared nervously at the man. Simultaneously, she rummaged through the stuff in her purse, looking for her mobile phone. She needed to call the police. The man now took a few steps towards the railing and then, he wasn't there anymore. He had disappeared into thin air, leaving Nidhi jittery. What was that? Hallucination? She walked to the window cautiously, on tiptoes, and peered out. The terrace was empty. She quickly drew the curtains and switched on the light. She then rushed to check the door that opened onto the terrace. It was bolted from inside. She checked the windows. They were shut and fastened. There was no way anyone could have gone out through the room. Was there another way to reach the terrace that she didn't know about?

Nidhi sat on a chair, her mind extremely uneasy. Something strange was going on in this house. Was it haunted? She couldn't sleep with this doubt in her mind. Nor was she brave enough to walk out and confront whatever was outside.

What was she to do? She didn't know anyone in the neighbourhood from whom she could seek help. The landlady was a nice, friendly woman but was away for a week visiting her sister in Agra. Should she call Mom and Dad? No, definitely not. They lived too far to help her in any way. They would rather get worried and spend a sleepless night. Moreover, if she reported the

matter to them, the first order she would receive from Dad would be to forget about the job and return to Shimla.

Nidhi spent the next ten minutes sitting on the chair and worrying. Then she decided she couldn't go on like that. Although her hunger had somehow vanished, she must heat and eat the pizza.

She removed her shoes, washed, changed into her night clothes, and sat down to eat. She didn't know how the pizza tasted. She munched and thought about how vulnerable she was.

Then she realized it could have been the shadow of a person. The thought made her smile. She left her plate with the half-eaten pizza on the table and boldly opened the terrace door. She walked out gallantly, like a warrior. There was no one outside. The terrace had more light now, aided by the moon. After making sure that the terrace was empty, Nidhi returned to her room and once again bolted the door from inside.

She felt much calmer now. How foolish of her to think it was a burglar or a ghost. She finished her pizza, and went to brush her teeth. Setting the alarm for seven in the morning, she switched off the main light, left the night lamp on, and went to sleep. She was fast asleep as soon as she hit the pillow.

The next day was very hectic at office. After the meeting, Nidhi made some urgent calls and then got busy finishing the pending work. She had no time to even think about the previous night's events. But the moment she sat down for lunch with Shweta, her colleague, she recalled the incident that had had her blood run cold the previous night.

"I was so foolish to think that someone was on the terrace," she remarked at the conclusion of her narration.

Shweta had been quietly listening to her report and now spoke for the first time. "So, you think you saw a shadow on the wall and mistook it for a thief?"

"No. There's no wall there. I live on the top floor, you know, in the *barsaati*. Our sitting room wall is the only wall there." By the end of her own statement, Nidhi was frowning.

"Then where was the shadow formed? On the floor?"

Nidhi stared at Shweta. A shadow doesn't form in the air, she realized now. "Shweta, I saw someone on the terrace. But later when I went out, no one was there."

"The person must have gone away, walked down the stairs, or through any other passage," Shweta offered her opinion.

"Gone where? There aren't any stairs. The terrace is enclosed on three sides by a railing. You can only plunge three storeys down to become a bag of broken bones."

"And the fourth side?"

"Fourth side is our rooms, silly."

"There must be some sort of stairs—"

"Didn't I tell you there aren't any stairs? The only way out is through our room. The terrace is an exclusive part of our one-bedroom apartment." Anxiety was apparent on her face.

Both the girls ate silently for a while. Nidhi was worried about how she was going to spend the next few nights alone in her apartment. Though Manisha was three years younger, she was the bolder of the two. Nidhi was so thankful that she lived with her now. But till she didn't come back, what was she going to do? Nidhi looked at Shweta pleadingly, "Shweta, do you mind staying with me for a few nights, till Mani comes back?"

Shweta's reply was prompt, "I would've, Nidhi. But you see, my mom is not keeping well these days." Nidhi could see that it was a clear-cut excuse.

Nidhi returned home a little early that Friday. While in office, she had requested her aunt if she could spend the weekend with her. She was, of course, more than welcome, her aunt had responded. Weekend with her aunt would be a breather. She now went about packing enough clothes and toiletries. There was an urgency in her actions. Nidhi threw one last glance around the room before locking it up. She wouldn't return here for a few days.

Driving through the jam-packed Delhi roads, she kept thinking if she was overreacting. There was nothing unseemly in her house. But then the sounds, the feeling, and the shadow on her terrace . . . She wasn't imagining them. That time she hadn't been scared or anything even close. She had been thinking of heating her pizza and eating it when she had spotted the man. It was definitely a man—a young slim man of medium height. And then he had simply vanished from the railing.

She would go to office on Monday from her aunt's place, she decided. But she couldn't avoid returning home that evening. She still had to manage two nights alone.

Monday evening, Nidhi returned to her apartment around six. She didn't want to enter a dark room and therefore had hurried through her work to be able to leave early. Once at the door of her house, she halted and breathed deeply a number of times. She opened the lock softly, carefully. It was as if she wanted to catch someone inside red-handed. She peeped in cautiously. Light was filtering in through the drawn curtains. There was nothing amiss.

She entered the room with equal vigilance. Walking on tiptoes she switched on the light. There was enough natural light at this hour, but she didn't want to wait for it to get dark. The room was as she had left it two days ago, quiet and peaceful. She began to breathe easy.

She prepared herself a light meal. There wasn't much choice anyway. The rations and essential food items needed replenishment. There was only some ham and two slices of bread. "I'll go shopping tomorrow on my way back from office." Making up her mind, she sat down to her meal of ham sandwich and salad. She topped it with a large mug of hot chocolate using the last bit of milk. She managed a broken sleep that night, but all went well. The next morning, she woke up tired but relieved.

Tuesday turned out to be different. Nidhi left her office around five thirty. Once again clouds were gathering in the sky. The traffic was unusually heavy and there was no way she could hurry through it. By the time she neared her house a storm had begun to brew. She didn't want to be caught in the dust storm. When she manoeuvred her car into her parking slot, there was a fully blown storm raging around. She rushed up the stairs to her apartment. Soon it was pouring outside.

She had managed to reach home dry. She opened the door without much hesitation and walked in. It was completely dark. The darkened sky thick with clouds was impeding the filtration of light. She switched on the light and sucked in her breath at what she saw. Her bed was tousled, the chairs had been shifted, and the cushions lay on the floor. It seemed that a naughty child had been left loose in the room. She stood surveying. "Maybe I left the mess in a hurry," she spoke loudly to herself. Though she knew she had neatly made the bed before leaving. In fact, she never left the bed unmade. Quelling the rising panic in her mind, she brought order back in the room and then sat on a chair, brooding. Her heart was racing; she was scared. But what could she do about it? Nothing at the moment. She prayed for the next ten minutes and that calmed her down.

Nidhi was in dire need of a cup of tea. Getting out of her stilettos, she quickly changed into more comfortable clothes and rushed to the kitchen.

She halted at the kitchen door. "Oh my God! I forgot all about shopping," she exclaimed loudly, pounding her head with her fist in frustration. Nidhi was ravenous, so she decided to walk into the kitchen to explore the possibility of discovering some hidden rations. Even though she knew there was nothing, nonetheless she peeped in the jar that contained tea. There was no sugar or milk either. And no bread, no flour, no rice, no eggs, no vegetables . . . What was she to do? She would wait for the rain to subside and

then rush to the shops.

Cursing her forgetfulness, she drank a glass of water and returned to the room. The first thing that came to her mind now was the terrace. Was there someone outside today too? She parted the curtain slightly but all that she saw was the empty space. It was only drizzling now. She heaved a sigh of relief and opened the door. Cool breeze from the exteriors rushed in. It was heavenly in the otherwise sizzling Delhi summer. She stood enjoying it for a while. Then the wind changed direction and rain began to fall directly on her. She quickly closed the door and came back to lie on her bed.

She was hungry and tired and uneasy. She didn't know what to do with her time. TV would not get its signal in this weather. There was no point even trying. At such moments, she missed Manisha and wished she didn't have a touring job. To pass the time, she opened her laptop and surfed through the internet. Soon tiredness overtook her hunger and she fell asleep.

When she woke up next it was pitch dark outside. She looked at the wall clock. The time was ten thirty. She shut her eyes tightly and covered them with her hands. "Oh noooo!" Though it wasn't raining, it was useless to go out. All shops had closed by now. "Hello." It was then that she heard a crisp clear male voice. Her eyes flew open. Someone was in the room. Nidhi sat up on her bed. Only the whirr and honking of the vehicles in the distance interrupted the indoor hush now. There was no one around—she couldn't see anyone.

Then she noted that the easy chair had again been moved, closer to the bed. She had put it next to the wall, hadn't she? The door leading to the terrace was slightly ajar too. Although she hadn't bolted it, she remembered closing it before sitting down. Only a strong push from inside could have opened it thus. There was a huge puddle of water in the room. While she slept, the wind had brought the rain directly into her room.

The puddle made Nidhi forget the mysterious 'Hello.' She fetched a mop and a bucket to clean the mess. She then switched on the cooler even though the weather was pleasant, and it wasn't hot inside. She didn't like the deep grim silence in the room. The friendly drone of the cooler's fan was comforting.

Nidhi returned to bed to call it a day. She had no choice. Her hunger pangs wouldn't allow her to read either. She switched on the night lamp and closed her eyes. She was sleeping hungry for the first time in life—and perturbed. She realized she wouldn't be able to sleep if she kept thinking about the unexplained, mysterious things happening around the house. *Don't be a scaredy-cat, Nidhi. Be strong. You shouldn't lose sleep over something non-existent.* Telling herself to be strong, she pulled the sheet over her face and tried to sleep. It

took her a while to fall into a fitful sleep.

She was dreaming, or that's what she thought, but she had felt a dark shadow loom over her. Petrified, she woke up with a start and looked around in a daze. Nidhi was panting as if she had run a marathon. She took a few deep breaths and bravely got up to use the bathroom. Washing her face with cold water she returned to bed. *I am not a chicken . There is nothing around of which I need to be afraid* . This self-assurance didn't work much. She shivered under her cover.

It took her a long time to fall asleep again. Sometime during the middle of the night her eyes flew open once again. She could see the door of her room wide open and light emitting through it. Why was the door open? And what was that light? A shadow slowly began to be formed—right in the centre of the doorframe. It was the shadow of a slim man—same shadow—so familiar. Nidhi's heart was racing. She was wet with perspiration and her nightwear stuck to her. What was happening in her life? And then, like the candle burning off with a dying flicker, it was all gone. She was sitting up on her bed, staring at the faded vision. She rubbed her eyes in disbelief and looked at the shining needles of the wall clock. It was half past three in the morning.

She realized that she was facing the wall and not the door. She had slept facing the door but she had now woken up in the exact opposite position. How? She was not a sleepwalker. Had she been dreaming, or had she witnessed some strange spectacle?

Something was not right here, in this apartment. It was eerie. They couldn't continue to live in it. They must start looking for a new house. *I will discuss it with Mani when she returns today.* For the next few hours she tossed and turned in her bed. Only when the dawn light seeped in did she manage to doze off.

When she woke up next, the sun was shining brightly. This was unusual. She was used to waking at the crack of dawn. That gave her plenty of time for her exercise, reading the newspaper, and to eat a sumptuous breakfast. She looked at the clock now. The time was eight thirty. "Oh my God! I'm going to be late today." She hopped out of her bed. In fifteen minutes she was out, rushing towards her car.

Her stomach was growling in protest. She hadn't eaten anything since yesterday's light lunch. She would order a deluxe sandwich from the coffee shop as soon as she reached office.

Like most days, Wednesday too was very busy for Nidhi. But she was not her usual energetic self. She felt fatigued. Her body was aching. If this continued, she would soon fall ill.

She managed to leave the office a little early and went straight to shop for

the essentials. Loaded with stuff, she reached her apartment around six thirty. She had less than an hour to have tea, shower, and then drive to the airport. Manisha's flight was landing at eight.

Nidhi switched on the kettle and went for a shower. As she stepped out in her bathing robe, she heard a soft sound of a metal rubbing against a surface. It was coming from the kitchen. Instead of going to the room, she walked into the kitchen. It was empty and very cold. *Why is it so cold here? The kitchen is always the hottest place of the house.* She rubbed her arms and exhaled deeply. Her breath instantly turned smoky like it did in the peak winters. Panic began to invade her senses. She quickly picked up her mug, dropped in a sugar cube, a tea bag, and turned to pour water in the mug. Then she watched aghast as the kettle moved on its own and fell down on the floor with a crash. The hot water splashed around as Nidhi jumped in reverse. *The boiling water could have scalded my legs and my feet. There's something bizarre around. Something that either wants us out, or is trying to draw our attention .*

Someone now breathed into her ear—an icy breath. "Hello." The voice was once again crisp clear, and hollow. Nidhi was frozen for a moment. Her heart was pounding, her legs shivering, her eyes trying to locate the source of the sound. The kitchen was stark empty. She dashed out of the kitchen, quickly changed into her jeans and a casual top with her wobbly hands, picked up her car keys, and rushed out of the house. Her legs were still shaky as she ran down the stairs.

Mani and I will have to seriously think of moving out of this house. It's no more a figment of my imagination. The bizarre in this house is real. I've never felt so unnerved. She drove slowly, having been caught in the slow-moving heavy traffic of the evening, and contemplated. Before she could reach the airport, she received three snappy calls from Manisha, who was already out of the formalities and waiting outside for the past fifteen minutes.

Once in the car, Manisha excitedly informed Nidhi about her fruitful trip. Nidhi listened to her lively chatter with a smile. She loved it. How she had missed her throughout the week. All the more this time.

"Mani, there was . . ." Nidhi started but stopped midway. Should she tell her sister about her uncanny experiences? She seemed so happy right now. Maybe later, after she had rested at home. She must be tired now.

"What was there, Didi?"

"Oh, nothing. There was a terrible thunderstorm here yesterday, like the one when a glass had smacked on our door."

"In the evening?"

"Yes. And then I went off to sleep. When I woke up, I found a great part of the room flooded."

"Room flooded? How?"

"Probably the wind had thrown our door open while I was sleeping."

"You slept with the door unbolted? When you were alone? Hello—we live in Delhi, not in Japan. Didi, how can you be so careless? It's not safe."

"I think I had bolted the door . . ."

"You think of a lot of things but don't really do them."

"It is useless telling you things. Sorry, I opened my mouth."

"Don't try hiding your shortcomings."

"As if you are Miss Perfection."

The angry sisters remained silent for the rest of the way. Such tiffs were not at all unusual. The sisters mostly landed up arguing over trivial things. But that didn't weaken their bond.

And sure enough as they reached home, all was forgotten. "Nice to be back home," Manisha announced as she alighted from the car. She took out the luggage from the boot. But she was allowed to carry only her travel bag while Nidhi insisted on carrying her heavy suitcase, which she dragged all the way up to their house.

Once inside, Manisha got busy unpacking. Nidhi went to the kitchen to prepare a quick meal.

"It's so hot and muggy in Delhi," Manisha grumbled as she switched on the cooler. "Hey, Didi, listen," she then hollered. "The wind from outside can't open the door. It opens only one way—from inside."

Nidhi came in the bedroom. "I know . . ." She and Manisha both stood in front of the door, staring at it. "Forget it," Manisha dismissed the affair after a while with the wave of her hand and moved away. Nidhi was still uneasy when they sat down to dinner in front of the TV. They watched the evening news, surfed a few channels and then Nidhi declared, "I am going to sleep, Mani. Haven't slept well the last few nights." She expected Mani to ask her the reason. Then perhaps she could discuss her experiences with her.

But Manisha was busy watching a movie on the TV. "Fine, you go to sleep. I will be going late to office tomorrow. I'll sleep in a while." And she went back to her movie. The moment she hit the pillow, Nidhi was fast asleep, so assuring was Manisha's presence.

Manisha slept around twelve. Sometime in the middle of the night she woke up, disturbed. A hand had lightly navigated from her shoulder down through her back and till almost her ankles. *What's wrong with Didi? It's not funny! What's she up to? She has never done that before!* She pulled her sheet over her in utter annoyance. "Didi, I'm fine. Please let me sleep."

Her grumbling and shifting woke Nidhi up. She was sleeping quietly in her

corner of their double bed with her back towards her. She now yawned and turned on her back, half awake and wondering why her sister had muttered in her sleep and called out to her. It was then that she saw it. A dark shadow rose from the empty space between the two of them. It remained in the sitting position on the bed, just next to her. *I'm hallucinating again. I've gone nuts* . Unable to fathom what was going to happen, Nidhi stared at the shadow, immobile. She could hear her heart pounding against her ribs. She slowly turned her back towards the shadow. She shut and opened her eyes to check if she was really awake. Who was this bizarre thing sitting on their bed? She began to tremble.

And then, Manisha's irritated words reached her ears. "Didi, stop fiddling with the cooler. Just leave it alone!"

Nidhi turned her head to look at her. Then her gaze went to the cooler. The shadow was now in front of it, the same shape and size, as she had seen on the terrace a few days ago—shadow of a slim man of an average height. "Mani, I'm here, on the bed," she whispered timorously. Her mouth had gone dry. And she realized what she could see was also visible to Manisha. She was not hallucinating. The shadow in the room was real.

Manisha turned to look at her sister and then at the shadow in front of the cooler. It hadn't moved. Who was this third person in their room? She jumped out of the bed and reached for the table lamp.

The moment the room got flooded with light, the shadow of the man dissolved. There was no one visible anymore. They both remained sitting on their bed for a long time—frozen and disturbed. They were modern, rational girls who had never believed in the paranormal. But now, without a shadow of a doubt, they had a ghost living with them.

Both of them were too drained to go to office the next morning. As they sat down for the morning tea, the matter naturally cropped up. "Oh my God! I still don't believe it. Didi, we live with a ghost!" Manisha covered her face with her palms and squirmed.

"Mani, please, not so loud." Nidhi looked around to see if the ghost would react.

"Where do you think he's now?" she whispered. Nidhi looked around. Terror in her eyes was obvious. "Come on, Didi, the ghost is not evil. He even caressed me." Manisha had a lopsided grin on her face.

Nidhi spoke in a muted voice, "Living with a ghost is not safe, Mani, neither amusing. It's scary. You never know where it would lead us. Whose ghost is it? We need to do something about it. We'll have to change the house."

After breakfast they decided to discuss the matter with Mrs. Usha Mittal, their landlady.

Mrs. Mittal, well into her late sixties, lived alone on the ground floor of her three-storeyed house. She had lost her husband a few years ago and her two children were married and settled in the U.S.

It had been a surprise for her that the young girls hadn't come to her with any complaints. The previous two tenants had stayed for only about a week each. The second one had, in fact, stayed for exact six days. The young man had packed his bags on the seventh day and had rushed out. He hadn't even bid a proper farewell for he was angry that the landlady hadn't informed him about the apartment being haunted.

So when she received a call from the girls, saying that they would like to see her, she decided to visit the apartment.

"So, young ladies, how have you been?" asked Mrs. Mittal, lowering herself into the easy chair. "I expected a visit from you which never came about. When you called I was thinking about you girls only."

"We are absolutely fine, Mrs. Mittal, fine as fine can be." Manisha sat on the other free chair.

"We are doing well, but had been really busy. Sorry we didn't get time to visit you," added Nidhi.

Mrs. Mittal's eyes scanned the room. Everything appeared calm and composed. Though the girls appeared perturbed, and a bit pale perhaps. *Hope things aren't as nasty as with the previous tenants.* There were a few questions on her mind that she was hesitating to ask.

"A cup of tea, Mrs. Mittal?" Nidhi asked.

"Sure."

Nidhi left to prepare tea. Mrs. Mittal looked at Manisha and bringing her face closer she asked softly, "Manisha, are you sure everything is fine here?"

"Why do you ask?" Manisha smiled. She realized now that Mrs. Mittal was well aware of the presence of a ghost here. No wonder the rent of this apartment, located in this posh colony, was so low.

"No, no, just like that. I wanted to see you young ladies well settled here. That's my duty, you know."

Manisha nodded but didn't want to further the discussion till Nidhi was present too. They both sat quietly for a while. Mrs. Mittal looked out of the window, roved her eyes around, as if she was searching for something. There was anxiety on her face. Finally, Manisha broke the painful silence. "Things are fine—except, except there are strange happenings, sometimes." She looked straight into Mrs. Mittal's eyes to see her reaction and noted that her

eyes had instantly dilated in apprehension.

"What happenings?" Mrs. Mittal asked with dwindling spirits. Just then Nidhi walked in with three steaming cups of tea. After offering tea to her guest and then to Manisha, she picked up her cup and settled cross-legged on the divan. There were only two chairs in the room.

Nidhi had overheard the conversation. She now stated casually, "You know, Mrs. Mittal, a few days ago, an unknown being was seated on the same chair as you are seated on right now."

"WHAT?!" Mrs. Mittal jumped up in fright, spilling tea on her sari. Manisha rushed to fetch her a napkin.

"What scared you so, Mrs. Mittal? I didn't say that the strange being was a ghost."

Manisha supressed her smile. "Do you think of the possibility of such an existence?"

Mrs. Mittal slowly sat back on the chair. There was no doubt that she had gone pale. But she didn't rush out at the mention of the ghost, as the girls had expected. The three women mutely sipped tea for a while. Mrs. Mittal was the one to break the silence. "I'm sorry, girls. I should have told you."

"Told us what?"

"Told you that people have experienced strange activities here. Two of my previous tenants left within a week of staying in these rooms."

"We know the reason," Nidhi smiled benignly at the elderly lady.

"What do you know?" Mrs. Mittal asked.

"We have seen the ghost of a young man, lean, medium height . . ." she spoke casually, as if she was describing a friend.

"Weren't you frightened? How come you didn't run away like the young men—my previous tenants?"

"The ghost means us no harm anymore. He even shares our bed. We realized this last night." Manisha chuckled.

"Oh my God! The ghost was rather violent with the young men who had hired this apartment. He would hurl things at them. Not only that, the second tenant said he kept pulling at his sheet at night and wouldn't let him sleep a wink. It was as if he wanted him out of the house."

"We are not saying there wasn't an attack—there were a few, a real deadly one too, two days after we had shifted to this house. It flung a glass pane at us —we think it was him. Pretty scary and dangerous. Manisha could have been seriously hurt. But that time we were confused, never realized it was on purpose." Nidhi shook her head and shuddered recalling the incident. "And then perhaps it intentionally threw down a kettle with boiling water that could have scalded my feet. But by and by he seems to have calmed down, has

become rather peaceful."

"He must have developed liking for you young girls—and imagine, sleeping in your bed." Mrs. Mittal smiled gently.

"Do you know whose ghost it is?" Nidhi asked.

Mrs. Mittal sighed and nodded. Both the sisters stiffened and exchanged glances. Mrs. Mittal swallowed the last sip of her tea. Keeping her empty cup on the table she placed her hands limply on her lap. She had a faraway look in her eyes. "Beta, last year I had placed an advertisement in the paper for renting out this apartment. The same evening a young man came to see me. Like you said—slim, medium height. And good-looking. He was very keen to stay in this apartment. He was about to get married and wanted to bring his bride to this quiet, peaceful colony after his wedding. He said he had fallen in love with my house." Mrs. Mittal closed her eyes and shook her head dejectedly. After a short pause she continued, "We haggled over the rent for a solid half an hour. He then told me that he couldn't afford what I was quoting but requested me to allow him less rent for a few initial months. He would surely manage to give me the quoted rent after his appraisal in a few months. I was taken in by the sincerity in his words and finally agreed on his quote, exactly what you now give. In fact, I have not increased the rent ever since . . ." Mrs. Mittal shook her head sadly. She looked out towards the terrace and sighed deeply.

"Ever since what?" Manisha asked softly.

"Ever since the tragedy. He had barely been in the house for a week—the week he had spent shopping and decorating the house for his bride when the calamity struck. Exactly a week before he was to be married, his bride-to-be met with a fatal accident." Mrs. Mittal sighed again and closed her eyes as if the tragedy was hovering before her eyes.

"How?" Nidhi whispered.

"I think she was on her way to her work when her two-wheeler was hit by a bus."

"Then what happened?" Manisha asked anxiously.

"That evening when the young man returned home around five, I was walking out to attend a party. We met at the gate. I noticed his dishevelled clothes. His face was pale, crestfallen, his red eyes swollen, so I stopped to check if he was feeling well. He told me about the tragedy. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. I expressed a quick sympathy and hurriedly walked out, considering my party more important. Although I knew he wanted me to be with him, the way he had looked at me, pleadingly. I left him alone to cope with his terrible misfortune." She sighed in exasperation. "That was a big mistake—to have walked out. It was very insensitive of me. I should

have stayed with him. Poor man had lost his parents in an accident a few years ago. And here was another terrible tragedy shattering his life. He needed company. And sympathetic ears."

"Oh! That's so sad," Nidhi said.

"Yes, it was sad. But things got much worse. When I returned home two hours later, there was a big crowd gathered outside. A few police vans were parked at the gate and the policemen were scurrying around in urgency. I froze, scared and apprehensive. My heart quivered and my legs trembled. 'What's wrong?' I asked a policeman. 'A young man living on the top floor has committed suicide by jumping down from the terrace of this house,' he said. I gasped. Then I saw his body wrapped in a white sheet, lying on a stretcher. The sheet had fresh blotches of blood all over. I felt suffocated and then I fainted. Never thought this could happen in my house." Mrs. Mittal lowered her head, almost on the verge of crying.

"That's so, so tragic," Manisha whispered woefully.

"I'm so sorry, Ramit, so sorry. Please forgive me." Tears were freely rolling down the old lady's cheeks. "I could have saved your life, had I known . . ."

"Was Ramit his name?"

Mrs. Mittal nodded slowly. There was a painful hush in the room now. Usha Mittal's sniffles slowly died down. She wiped her face. "I'm sorry, girls. I have not cried like this for a long time, not since I lost my husband. May his soul rest in peace!"

"May Ramit's soul rest in peace too," Nidhi stated, wiping her tears with the back of her hand. Manisha sighed and nodded.

The three women instinctively joined their hands to pray. The silence got broken by the ticking clock—a reminder of the transience of human life and the blessing of being alive. The three occupants of the room remained unaware of the brevity of time as they sent heartfelt and silent prayers for peace and perseverance of people struck by terrible misfortunes. They ardently prayed for eternal peace of Ramit's troubled soul.

Nidhi and Manisha lived in that house for four years, and never again felt any strange presence there. The spirit had finally found peace, for someone had prayed sincerely for the unsettled soul.

That was all it was seeking.

HORROR IN A DORMITORY

DIBRUGARH , ASSAM , OCTOBER 1966

Upendra Gohain was on tenterhooks. He marched non-stop on the terrace of his house in agitation—from one end to the other and back. The court notice had completely shaken him out of his inertia. The hearing was due in two months. He would have to arrange for a lawyer, prepare for cross arguments, and so on. It wasn't going to be easy. His chances to win the case were as good as the possibility of pigs flying in the sky.

He would have to figure out a way to wriggle out of this mess.

As per the protocol, his cousin Harideb should have had equal share in the tea estate and the palatial house, the property inherited from their fathers, who were brothers.

Soon after Upendra had finished his college, a tragedy struck. One dark night, both his and Harideb's parents were brutally murdered by dacoits who had the information about a huge sum of money lying in the house. Upendra was away visiting his maternal uncle and had thus escaped the same fate. Harideb was studying in a boarding school then. Upendra had taken over the estate immediately, and supported Harideb's education. Later, when Harideb graduated from college and demanded his share, he was given a small part of the estate and some money, enough only to buy a small house. Though Harideb had clearly felt cheated, he was too soft to protest against his cousin who had supported him till then.

Twenty years ago, Harideb had got married to Himanta, a woman with beauty and brains. Things were fine for a few years and then Harideb began to

put pressure on his cousin for equal share in the house and the Khong tea estate. Upendra kept ignoring him. Eventually their relationship became bitter. And now Harideb had resorted to the last option—appeal in the court.

Upendra's worry was if Harideb got his entitled share, what would be left for his sons?

Harideb and Himanta had twin daughters, beautiful and smart like their mother. They had recently joined a college in Calcutta. Upendra was acutely pricked by this fact, because all his three sons had turned out to be useless nincompoops. He had sent them to the best boarding schools but none of them could even get past tenth standard. It hadn't bothered him much. He had enough to provide for them. He had taught them the skills of running the tea estate and had decided to give each his separate share.

But now the court case was going to change things. There would be waste of time and money over lengthy litigation, which was likely to go in Harideb's favour. And that would mean he wouldn't be left with much to bequeath to his sons who were used to nothing but opulence.

Upendra folded the court notice and shoved it in his pocket. He then stood holding the railing, his eyes absorbing the beauty of his verdant estate in the middle of the picturesque rolling hills of Dibrugarh. But, his mind was as restless as an approaching storm. *I might have cheated Harideb out of his share, but I've shed my blood and sweat all these years on this estate, to grow the finest quality tea that's much in demand in the western countries. If I've grown rich, it's all because of my hard work. I won't part with even an inch of this land.* The railing vibrated as he smacked his fist on it. *It's all scheming Himanta's doing. She has poisoned Harideb's mind to claim their share. I'm sure she's the one behind this appeal in the court. She's a real pain in my neck, a thorn in my flesh. Something needs to be done urgently to teach this woman a lesson.*

Upendra's mind was in a whirlwind, desperate to find a potent and easy solution. He would have to strike them, crush them, so that they would forget all about court cases and their shares. Behind Upendra's tightly shut eyes and deep frown, his brain was now cooking up treacherous schemes.

When he opened his eyes next, there was a sinister spark in them. A devilish smile played on his lips. His mind had hatched a brutal plot.

He had decided to hit them where it would hurt the most. *Let them spend the rest of their lives wallowing in pain after losing their darling twins, Salmi and Santati. But I will have to be very careful. No one should ever be able to point a single finger at me.*

He immediately summoned his estate's supervisor, Moidul. He had good news for him. He would get a big raise in his salary.

Moidul had worked on Upendra's estate for the past thirty years and was now nearing sixty. He had lost his wife many years ago and had brought up

Udbala, his daughter, all by himself.

Udbala . . . The wild lusty girl, what a pleasure she's in bed! Upendra rubbed his hands in delight. Just the thought of it excited him.

His extramarital relation with Udbala had remained a secret till a few months ago when Moidul had caught them in bed together, in his own house. After the initial shock and embarrassment, Moidul had decided to keep his mouth shut. Why would a father open his mouth and character assassinate his daughter? But, had he a choice? He would lose his job if he protested. So, willingly or unwillingly, he became their partner in crime. But he was upset. His daughter was getting out of his hands, and he was getting tired of managing her waywardness.

Since he couldn't take any other action, Moidul had decided that this was a great opportunity to use the rich and influential man. Udbala had completed her graduation from a local college with poor grades. She had got a lowly paid job in a small school at Dibrugarh. Now Upendra Babu would get her a good job in Calcutta. Hadn't he mentioned that his wife's cousin ran a college in Calcutta? This way he'll be able to kill two birds with a single stone. Udbala would get a good paying job and be kept away from this lusty man, who was likely to spoil her chances of getting a good husband here. Perhaps she would find a suitable man in Calcutta and get married.

Udbala's intentions were no different. Both the father and the daughter had their reasons for catching the rich man in their net. So, after Moidul had unearthed their clandestine relationship, he had demanded a fabulous raise in his salary and a job for Udbala. Upendra couldn't refuse. But he was no fool.

And, now that he had received the court notice, it was time to make the duo pay back for every favour bestowed on them. Udbala, who was working in their relative's college, would be secretly transferred to the same college where Harideb's twin girls were studying. That shouldn't be difficult. Though he would have to pay her a hefty sum, it would be better than losing money in fighting the court case.

Udbala would now be the saviour of his estate.

CALCUTTA , JUNE 1988

There was a continuous chatter of the animated girls in the college premises as if a huge flock of sparrows had all of a sudden decided to invade the area. The Lady Joga College for girls at Calcutta, that had celebrated its thirty years of existence the previous year, had opened after two months of the summer break. At the gate there was a throng of SUVs, sedans, humpbacks, cycle-

rickshaws, *tongas* . Parents and their daughters, lugging their luggage, were rushing in as if it was not a college but a train they would miss by being late. There were unreserved tears especially on the faces of girls joining the hostel for the first time, and casual goodbyes by the returning students.

There was a huge crowd in front of the notice boards. The final year students, who were to be lodged in the first and second floors of the recently constructed West Wing of the hostel building, dispersed happily though not without remarks like "Thank God, we're out of that old eerie building" and "Wonder who's getting the top east." The second year students trudged towards the East Wing a little reluctantly, stating casually—"First and second floors are okay" and "I hope no one's housed in the dorm. Not after what happened last year. The principal should have that much consideration . . ."

Once the administration lobby was cleared of the seniors, the first year students stood there uncertainly. They were young and innocent, less assured of themselves than their senior counterparts. It was natural for they were barely out of school and perhaps had left home for the first time. Shifting their tired weights from one leg to the other and complaining in whispers, they all stood waiting to be guided.

The tired young girls heaved sighs of relief when they finally received the attention of the hostel wardens. They were divided into two groups. One group would live on the top floor of the West Wing and the other on the top floor of the East Wing. Revati was one of the eighteen girls of the last group waiting to be allotted their living space on the East Wing of the hostel.

"Come on, girls, those who have been allocated the East Wing dormitory," came the booming voice of a hostel warden, "follow me."

Obeying the command, the eighteen tired young girls picked up their luggage and trudged behind an elderly lady. "I am Miss Udbala Bora, your hostel warden. And don't ever forget—I don't spare the girls who disobey me."

She received much attention at the latter remark. What an introductory statement it was! Though complete strangers till now, the girls furtively glanced at each other and an immediate bond was established among them. For in that instant they realized they would have to unite against a common enemy. Such was the aura oozing out of the lady—resentful, harsh, forbidding, and the young girls noted it all in just a few minutes of their association.

A short and stout middle-aged woman with salt and pepper hair cut short, fair complexion, high cheekbones, Miss Udbala would have been a pleasant woman only if she didn't have those small, unsympathetic piercing eyes, and the puckered brows that made the girls uneasy. There was something very

abhorrent about this harsh-looking Assamese woman.

She accompanied them till the ground floor, the area that was the common meeting space of the wing, but refused to go beyond. She showed them the stairs and barked, "Now rush up to the very top. And I don't want to hear any noise or complaints." She then stood watching them scurrying up the stairs with narrowed eyes and a strange unexplained expression on her face. Was it anxiety or doubt? *Maybe she is just a sadist,* Revati, who was the last one to go, speculated as she slowly climbed up. *Nevertheless, I don't like this strange woman. I'm going to keep my distance from her. And neither do I like this building. It's giving me creeps.*

The East Wing of the hostel was a time-worn building in dull grey stone. The original grey was now hidden behind the dirty greenish stubborn mildew that was wilfully growing on its walls. A dismal aura seemed to be encompassing the whole structure despite the administration's effort to bring cheer through a well-kept garden around it. The lobby was a large whitewashed sullen space, with a few red upholstered chairs and glass-topped tables. But they utterly failed to bring cheer. The narrow dingy stairs were even more depressing. *Am I feeling sad because I am used to living in big modern bungalows?*

Climbing up three decks of stairs dragging the luggage along wasn't easy. When Revati reached the top floor she halted at the door, her nose wrinkled in disgust as an overpowering, stale, mouldy smell hit her nose. There was something more unpleasant in the air here. It was cold and unwelcoming. But she was so tired at the moment that she couldn't care less. She badly needed to rest her aching feet and she entered the dorm without more rumination.

Unlike the other floors that had rooms, the top floor was one large hall. Though the walls and windows had been freshly painted in white and lime green respectively, Revati got an instant impression of having entered some ancient cloister. Small beds were lined on both the sides of the dormitory. Each personal space had the very basics—a small cupboard, a study table, and a chair. The place was bland and gloomy, with vile vibes oozing out from every corner.

Revati looked for her name tag and dumped her large tin trunk next to her assigned bed. Removing the airbag from across her shoulders, she sat on the chair rubbing her feet. She roved her eyes around and smiled. Most girls had brought their possessions in tin trunks. Did all mothers think alike? What a fuss she had created when her mom had bought a metal trunk and insisted that she carry her things in it. "It'll be so embarrassing," she had protested, "as if I come from a poor family. My dad is a Naval commander and what a shame it would be when I carry things in this ancient- looking tin trunk." She

had pouted her mouth and crossed her arms defiantly. Her mother had calmly advised her, "Beta, anybody can cut through the leather and steal your things. Thefts are common in the hostels. I know. But nobody will be able to steal from your solid trunk. Remember to keep it locked at all times."

Once she felt revived, Revati decided to organize her stuff. The other girls too were occupied doing things and she began to notice them. Right across, a dusky and charmingly pudgy girl had plopped herself on the floor. She was removing the contents from her trunk one by one and dumping them on her bed. A beautiful, fair girl to her right attracted her attention next. She seemed distressed as she sat on her bed massaging her feet. Their eyes met. "Hi, I'm Revati Banerjee, from Jamshedpur. You still tired?" She waved at her.

The girl smiled amiably. "I am Sanya Gohain, from Dibrugarh."

"Dibrugarh? Never heard of the place."

"It's in Assam. My grandfather owns a huge tea estate there. My father works on it too."

"Oh. Are your feet still hurting? Mine are better now."

"I wore my new sandals and they gave me shoe bites," she responded with a moan.

"I have a soothing antiseptic ointment. Want it?" Sanya nodded and Revati rummaged through her stuff to take out her medicine box. She took out a tube and then went to help Sanya. She sat with her, gently applying the ointment on her wounds, and chatting. An instant bond was established between the two. Revati found Sanya a candid and refined girl. Something came upon her all of a sudden. She wanted to protect her, safeguard her, as if she was in some kind of danger. Why she felt like that, she couldn't understand. And for the rest of the days that they were to stay in this dorm, Revati would not let Sanya be alone. She was to become her constant companion—a sister that Sanya never had.

Not having been given any attention, the girl from across called out, "Hi, I'm Nitya Sen, from Asansol. Want my help?" Revati and Sanya shook their heads and at the same time waved at her. Then the girls got busy settling down.

The sun slowly began to set on their first day at the hostel. As the light began to fade, a strange sadness began to creep in. It weighed heavily on Revati's heart. Maybe she was missing home, her mom and dad. She would have to get used to living without them. She lay on her bed thinking of them. "It's seven thirty. Dinnertime, mates," somebody from the far corner declared. "Remember Miss Udbala said if we are late, we won't get any dinner."

"I'm hungry. Can't miss dinner. Come on, girls. Let's go," came a

response. All eighteen girls hurriedly slipped into their footwear and left together for the hostel's dining hall. The moment Revati came out, she felt her spirits lifting, though none of the girls were chirpy, as would be expected. They spoke in whispers. *It's surely dictator Miss Udbala's influence* . Revati smiled at her passing thought.

Dinner was insipid, nothing close to home food they were used to. The seniors were eating with gusto, and they couldn't complain and draw their attention. It could lead to being ragged. So, the newcomers ate silently. *Maybe, gradually we'll get used to this bland hostel food,* thought Revati.

When the dinner was more or less over, Miss Udbala walked in regally, like a queen, stretching her short frame to look tall and formidable. The latter was not needed. She anyway looked quite rough and intimidating. "Girls, once again, I'm Miss Udbala Bora, in case you have forgotten my name. I'm the oldest hostel warden of this college. Been here for more than twenty years. Joined this college in 1966." She looked around to see how well this information was being absorbed. The girls deliberately remained impassive. They didn't like this woman at all. Her eyes were too restless, unremittingly shifting. She didn't make eye contact with any girl, as if she was guilty, hiding a dark secret in those flitting eyes. "Now," she continued in her resonating voice, "except the first year students of the East Wing, the rest quickly disperse." She waited till only eighteen students remained in the dining hall. Then she folded her arms, roved her shifting eyes to count the girls and then snorted, "Pay your full attention, you newcomers. These are the rules you need to follow strictly. If you flout any of them, you'll get into serious trouble. Is that clear?"

The girls exchanged quick glances. They were utterly disappointed by the rude welcome they were being given by this unpleasant woman.

"The lights will be switched off at ten sharp. You don't have to bother about that. I will switch off the mains." The girls looked at each other. Some seniors standing outside the door, behind Miss Bora, smirked covertly and made faces. *Nobody respects this woman* , Revati instantly realized. Then having been momentarily distracted, Revati's attention went back to what Miss Udbala Bora was blathering. "Wake-up time will be five thirty. A bell will ring and nobody should be seen in bed after that."

"Six would be a better wake-up time," somebody spoke in a timid voice but mercifully her voice didn't reach the warden.

"Nobody will use the hostel telephone to call their parents, or anybody else. You can call home only once a week from the confectionary shop that you'll find on your way to the classes."

"Her brother probably runs that shop." The whisper brought smiles on

some faces.

"What's there to smile about? Eh?" Miss Udbala gave the girls a quick piercing look and then continued, "On Sundays you can go to the shop to buy provisions as well as use the phone." A sudden murmur arose from the listeners.

"Only once a week?" some bold girls protested.

"Draconian laws. Are we in college or in a jail?" somebody whispered.

"School was better."

"Shut up, everyone. Stop whispering! How dare you? Next time you utter a word, you'll be out of the hostel. Though I'm capable of worse things," barked Miss Udbala, glaring at the girls as if she was ready to eat them alive. "Now go straight to your dorm. I will be following you there." The girls were stunned by her behaviour. Why was this woman trying to intimidate them? What were her motives?

The new hostellers stomped up the stairs towards their dormitory, grumbling at Miss Udbala's strict rules.

"My mom told me to call her every day. She'll be worried if I don't," Nitya moaned.

"We are not babies that we are to be told when to call and whom to call! And who's she to tell us to talk to our parents only once a week? Is this some kind of a prison?" Revati grumbled.

"And the strict curfew . . ."

"The lights will be switched off exactly at ten . . . I'll switch off the mains," a girl imitated Miss Udbala to almost her exact tone and the others sniggered.

"We must discuss it with the dean tomorrow," Nitya suggested.

"Wait, wait, girls. Can't start complaining so soon. It could go against us," Sanya opined. "Actually . . . You know, I may have some influence. I'll talk to my grandpa . . ." But her words were barely noted. The girls who had entered the dorm shrieked and the others rushed up. Once inside, they all gasped and stood shell-shocked at the mess they confronted. Their bedspreads were tousled; some lay on the floor. But the worst was the area around Sanya's bed —as if it was the epicentre of an earthquake. Her chair lay toppled and the table had been swept clean of all her stuff including her new books. The clothes she had earlier organized in her cupboard lay scattered around. She shrieked the loudest.

"What a welcome!" Revati commented.

"This is the seniors' doing. They are having fun troubling us."

"Ragging. Girls, welcome to the famous college ragging."

"Well, this ragging is not embarrassing or painful. I've heard of really bad

things."

The girls got busy clearing up the mess. They had barely finished cleaning, changing into their nightclothes and filling their bottles from the water cooler that stood in a corner of the dorm, when the hall plunged into darkness. The suddenness of it further shocked the already panicky lot. Their screams and squeals reverberated in the hall.

"Shut the door, someone shut the door," came desperate pleas.

"Mouli is closest to the door. Please, Mouli, shut the door. Quick." Someone rushed to the door and made a desperate attempt to lock it. The solid iron latch was large and rusted, and emitted screeching sounds. The grinding sound of it being slipped into its groove was heard after the initial struggle. The girls heaved sighs of relief. That felt safe. Otherwise the dormitory seemed so unfriendly.

"Is it already ten?" came a voice.

"I don't think so."

"Then why have the lights been switched off so soon?"

"Where is Miss Udbala? She said she would follow us."

"I saw her turning away from the main door of the building."

The different voices continued in the dark. Then a hesitant voice called out, "I need to use the bathroom."

"Don't you have a torch, Sanya?" Revati, who was nearest to her, prodded.

A lamp at the street level sent up some faint light, salvaging the dormitory from absolute darkness. As her eyes got adjusted to the faint light in the room, Revati felt better. She rummaged through her bag and retrieved a torch. She walked till the bathroom door with Sanya and then handing her the torch, returned to her bed.

Revati had once again begun to feel lonely and sad. Had she done the right thing by choosing to join this college in Calcutta instead of a local one in Jamshedpur? At least she would have stayed home. This place was so unfriendly, almost hostile. To top it all, Miss Udbala was like a spiteful tigress, waiting to prey on them. The overall experience today had been so unpleasant.

She missed her parents intensely. How they had stood at the college gate, waving at her, bidding her goodbye. Her mom had tears in her eyes and her dad had a sad smile on his face. Dad's words rang in her ears—'She's grown up now. We have to come to terms with her being away from home; she cannot live with us forever. One day she'll leave us anyway, when she gets married.' She loved them so much. Two tears trickled down Revati's cheeks and then she jumped out of her bed in fright. So did the other girls. Some were rushing towards the bathroom from where a strange scream had been

heard. A few torches came alive. She quickly wiped her tears with the back of her hand. "Sanya is in the bathroom. Alone," Revati shouted and ran behind the other girls.

They found Sanya sitting on the floor of the first cubicle of the toilets, in a corner, gasping and shivering.

"Oh my God." "What's wrong with her?" "What happened Sanya?" "Are you not well?" many voices asked in concern.

Sanya tried speaking through her chattering teeth, but nothing more than some gurgling sounds emerged. The girls helped her up and brought her to her bed. Someone poured her a glass of water. The whole group of seventeen girls stood around her, patiently watching her holding the glass in her shaking hands and slowly sipping water, trying to get composed. Revati sat with her stroking her back lovingly. She was alarmed by the way Sanya was trembling.

It took Sanya almost five minutes before she managed to narrate her ordeal. She looked around with her panic-filled eyes and whispered cautiously, "There's somebody in the bathroom." A few girls with torches rushed to check. They returned in a minute, shaking their heads. "The bathroom is absolutely empty."

"No. There *was* someone there in the bathroom," Sanya insisted through her sobs. "I was inside one of the toilets when the door rattled. Then a very strange voice, like, like a ghostly voice repeated a few times, 'Kill . . . Kill.' I didn't have the courage to come out, even though I assumed the seniors were trying to scare me. I remained inside the toilet, waiting for them to go or one of you to come to check." She looked around at the girls accusingly, her eyes finally resting on Revati. "Didn't you realize I had taken unduly long in the bathroom?" The girls looked at each other and shrugged. Nobody had really bothered. Sanya continued, "When it was all quiet, I slowly came out. There was no one there but I felt a distinct movement behind me. I also felt somebody touch my back and then pull my hair. I turned to confront the culprit but there was no one. At the same time one of the bathroom doors opened, on its own, slowly, as if someone was pushing it open. I aimed the torchlight inside. It was absolutely empty. And then the same ghostly voice said, 'Sanyaaaahhhh kill.' The whole place was filled with strange vibrations." She paused here and frowned. "It was then that I realized there was something eerie there. It was so, so damn scary. I felt suffocated and couldn't move. With great effort I managed to scream." The girls stood passively listening to her. "This place is haunted, I tell you . . ."

With the toss of their heads the sceptic ones immediately dismissed her claim. Others shivered. "Sanya, don't be ridiculous. It was a prank played by someone—perhaps like you said, by the senior students."

"But there was no one inside the bathroom. Not a single soul. No one that I could see. And I don't think any of the seniors know my name. Not yet." Tears were streaming down Sanya's cheeks and she wiped them with her scarf. "It was too scary."

"I am sure it's the seniors trying to frighten us, innovative way of ragging us. They must have got to know your name somehow," Revati declared with conviction.

"I think so too," Nitya seconded her opinion though hesitation was apparent in her voice. Others nodded. This was probably the best explanation. But, how did they enter the dormitory without being noticed and then left it too? Was there a secret passage that they had used? And how would they know that it would be Sanya using the bathroom alone?

Though Revati's rationalization had helped Sanya gain her composure, the doubt remained in the mind of each girl. "Girls, no one goes to the toilet alone from now on. Let's go in small groups. Be cooperative. There's safety in numbers. Come on, Sanya, relax, and go to sleep. It's been a long day," Revati urged and the girls slowly dispersed for a restless night at the dorm.

Revati could not fall asleep for a long time. What Sanya had experienced was weird, but was it real? The bathroom was exclusively built for the dorm. There wasn't any outside entrance to it. Then how could anyone enter and disappear so fast? She and Sanya were together the whole evening. There was no way the seniors would have known Sanya's name—they hadn't been introduced. And even if they knew her name, how did they recognize her in the dark?

She tossed and turned endlessly. She was used to her room, her space, her home. This new place made her uneasy, very uneasy. The dormitory was also weirdly cold and depressing. It made her sad. It took her a long time to fall asleep. It was a disturbed sleep, full of nightmares. She dreamt that Sanya was screaming to be rescued. Someone was trying to kill her. She wanted to take her away to a safe place but couldn't move her. Sanya had turned into a stone statue, too heavy to be lifted.

She woke up highly agitated. Her nighty was wet with her sweat. She glanced at the clock. Two needles of her new clock shining in the dark gave her creeps. It was midnight. She sat up and drank a few sips of water from her bottle. It was then that she heard the distinct sound. Someone in heavy boots was climbing up the stairs. The sound stopped outside the dormitory door. Then it reappeared. The footsteps were retreating, going down. *Is that Miss Udbala on a round? Does she do that often? In the middle of the night? When does she sleep?* Someone was once again climbing up the stairs. Clearly. Loudly. And

leisurely. Revati slowly fell back into sleep, deeper and calmer this time. Someone was awake and watching over them.

The first day of classes was very hectic. The labyrinths of corridors leading to various classes baffled the newcomers, and they were seen scurrying around in small groups trying to locate their classrooms. Revati and Sanya were together in all the classes. Coincidentally, they had chosen the same subjects. All the girls of the dormitory came together for the last class of the day, the English Literature class. When the class got over a little after four, the girls decided to go to the college cafe for tea. They combined two tables, sat around them, and ordered tea and colas and a few plates of *bhajjia* . Stuffing her mouth with a delectable piece of the hot, savoury dish, Revati broached the subject of Udbala's nightly rounds. "Miss Udbala is a weird woman. Did you hear her footsteps at midnight?" she asked.

Sanya promptly responded, "Yeah, there was someone walking up and down the stairs last night and I got petrified . . ."

A number of other anxious voices surfaced.

"You heard them too?"

"I wondered."

"I was startled."

"Who could be walking up and down at midnight? Not used to something like that."

"Absolutely! It was so scary!"

"Wait, wait, girls." It was Sanya gesturing at them to calm down. "Miss Udbala wears flat soft sandals, not boots. I noticed it when we were following her last night. And the sound we heard was of heavy booted footsteps."

"She could have changed into boots to make sure we heard her."

"No. I still think it's the second year students up to some mischief again. They are trying to scare us. So let's play it down, pretend as if nothing has been happening," Revati suggested.

Mouli intervened, "I still think it is Miss Udbala. I heard the sound very clearly since I sleep next to the door. It was the same person walking up and down. The sound went on for about fifteen minutes and then faded. And there was no other sound, no whispers to indicate more girls being around having fun at our expense."

Some girls shrugged. Others nodded. Their new place of learning was unnerving them. But it would perhaps be pragmatic not to begin probing or complaining. They all were afraid Miss Udbala might react adversely.

"Let's ignore the matter altogether. Whoever is trying to scare us will get bored after our lack of reaction," Revati recapped. The idea appealed to the

others. Having finished their tea and snacks the girls dispersed. Revati and Sanya went to sit under a tree in the college lawns. They had developed a strong friendship within the span of a day. They had so much to talk about. And Sanya was a non-stop chatterbox. They discussed their families, their schools, their aspirations, and so forth. Sanya did most of the talking. "After graduation, I am going to take over my grandpa's estate, you know. He told me so. I'm his eldest and favourite grandchild. He loves me so dearly. And I love him the most, more than my own parents," she informed Revati.

They stayed out chatting till the light began to fade. Revati felt good. She missed home a little less today.

The night slowly sneaked in and so did the gloom in the dorm. It sucked out the normal exuberance of the girls, turning them all sullen and silent. Many girls returned to the dorm just to change into their casuals and rushed out. Then the whole flock returned together immediately after dinner so that they would have enough time to do their stuff before Udbala's imposed blackout. What reasons did she have to switch off their lights thus? It wasn't happening in the other hostels. The girls had checked. Neither had the other wardens imposed on them such needless restrictions. Why with them then? It wasn't fair. Sitting at the dining table they had discussed it all and then decided to approach the college principal at the earliest.

On their second day at the dorm too, the lights were switched off precisely at ten. The girls slipped under their sheets. Some had immediately dozed off, while others were still tossing and turning, when there occurred a loud bang startling them all. The girls jumped out of their beds.

"Earthquake," someone shouted.

"No, silly, it isn't an earthquake. This region is not earthquake-prone."

"Someone's cupboard seems to have fallen down. Anybody under one?" someone joked.

"How can a cupboard fall on its own?"

The street lamp was off today. Slivers of moonlight glided into the dorm and fell on the beds next to the windows. The rest of the dormitory was dark. A few torches were switched on. Huddled together, the bravest of them, Revati ahead of all, investigated the whole dorm. They found nothing. "Maybe we are mistaken. The sound could have occurred somewhere outside. Perhaps it came from the floor below," Nitya presented her point of view.

For quite some time, the girls stood nestled like a bunch of grapes, shaken and scared, not impressed by Nitya's explanation this time, Revati least of all. The sound had very clearly come from within their dorm and from the space between her and Sanya's bed. Strangely there was nothing amiss. "We are at

the top of the building, girls, so something must have fallen on the roof right above," Revati suggested.

"Hmm . . ."

"Quite possible."

The girls slowly returned to their beds.

The footsteps were heard on the stairs again that night, and the next, and next. The girls smiled and smirked at the utter defeat of the senior students trying to frighten them. For one full week they pretended to be casual about the affair. Some girls did notice the second year students glancing at them probingly or throwing the query, "All okay?" That added to their conviction that the second year hostellers were the mischief-makers.

No matter how much they pretended everything was okay, the nightly disturbance was affecting them all. Peculiarly it affected Sanya the most. She had begun to look pale and listless, as if being squeezed off of her energy. "Are you well?" Revati asked her a number of times. "I just feel weak. Maybe the food here is not suiting me," she would reply.

Meanwhile, they tried speaking to the dean who said she would attend to their complaints only the week after since she was very busy at the moment. The college principal was away attending a seminar in another city. They would approach her as soon as she returned, decided the girls.

Then, a week later, the footsteps entered the dorm.

Revati was woken from her sleep when she heard them. It was only one pair of footsteps. *Can it be a senior girl? Or has Miss Udbala come inside for a surprise inspection? That means Mouli has forgotten to bolt the door tonight,* Revati speculated but didn't open her eyes. She had to pretend to be fast asleep, to escape confronting Miss Udbala. The footsteps now reached the end of the dorm and then faded into the toilet. Revati kept awake for them to return but that didn't happen. By and by she fell asleep.

When next morning Revati raised the topic of footsteps inside the dorm, she was amused to know that those who had heard them had followed exactly her stance, and pretended to be asleep. Some girls were actually fast asleep and had heard nothing.

"Where is Mouli? She's supposed to fasten the door at night. We gave her the responsibility but she left it open for anybody to just walk in," Revati furiously looked around for her, to give her a piece of her mind.

"I think she is in the bathroom," Sanya informed.

Just then Mouli returned and Revati chided her. "Why didn't you bolt our dorm door last night, Mouli? We don't like Miss Udbala marching in, in the middle of the night. If you are so forgetful, I'll—"

"But I had bolted it," Mouli protested. "Hundred percent. Look, it's still bolted." She stood casually wiping her wet hair with a towel. "Why? Why do you ask?"

"Then you heard nothing last night?"

"No!"

The few girls, who had heard the footsteps, stared at the bolted door. The person had entered from the main door, they were sure. But then how? They looked at each other; perhaps someone would be able to explain. All eyes finally came to rest on Revati. This time she just pursed her lips and shrugged. She had gone pale.

The next night, before Miss Udbala switched off the lights, the girls made sure the door was bolted. It was checked by many. A few chairs were kept in front of the door to create a blockade. If the seniors tried to enter, the falling chairs would warn them. The washroom door too was bolted and checked repeatedly. The girls then went to bed, much relaxed.

Exactly at midnight the sound of heavy footsteps recurred. Someone entered through the shut and blockaded door without disturbing the chairs, or creating any other sound. In the silence of the midnight, the sound was crisp and clear. Revati heard it too. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight . . . stop. She shivered and kept counting. The footsteps stopped after every eight steps. Probably it took that many to reach from one bed to the other. Then she heard them right across. Revati's eyes flew open. In that dim light, she couldn't spot anyone. Nothing! Then something like a thin mist moved. Footsteps recurred. They were heading towards her bed. Revati's heart stopped beating. She was gasping for breath. The footsteps stopped next to her bed. She watched in horror, her eyes wide open in fear as her mosquito net tilted. At a point a depression was formed on the netted material, like some face pressed on to it, peering down at her. Revati's scream remained gagged inside her throat. Then the depression lifted and the footsteps moved on. She heard a few soft whimpers of frightened girls. The footsteps stopped next to Sanya's bed. There was a sudden angry stamping of foot. A chair toppled as if someone had kicked it. Sanya's terrified sobs were clearly heard. "Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii . . ." A hissing breeze arose like a whirlwind, filling the dorm in its chilling grip and then the sound gradually subsided. The footsteps moved towards the bathroom and faded into it.

No one in the dorm moved; no one dared to leave her bed. They slipped deeper into their coverlets and shivered.

Revati didn't sleep a wink the whole night. She softly chanted prayers and waited for the morning. At the first light of the day, she was up, sitting on her bed. So were the others. Their faces were pale and disturbed. The girls

exchanged glances but nobody dared to speak. What they had experienced last night wasn't normal at all. There was something weird in the dorm, something paranormal. Sanya was right.

Revati was the first one to get out of the bed. She put on her slippers and approached the door on tiptoes. Seventeen pairs of eyes followed her. Once at the door, she hurriedly began removing the chairs. "Come on, girls. Help," she whispered urgently. The others left the bed very reluctantly, as if something untoward would happen if they did. Once they were out of the beds, it took them a minute to dash out of the dorm.

They were rushing down the steps when they met a few second year students who were enjoying the cool morning breeze out in the corridor. "Wait. What happened? Where are you all rushing off to?" A tall, pretty girl rushed to block their passage. A few more girls joined her. With the passage now completely blocked, the juniors stood helplessly. "Tell us. What's the matter?" Superna, the pretty girl asked politely.

Though some of the terrified girls were itching to share their ordeal with them presuming that these girls could probably throw light on the strange things going on in the dorm, they were also afraid of becoming targets of their jokes. Somewhere at the back of their minds lingered the doubt that perhaps the seniors had something to do with their ordeal.

After a painful silence during which the seniors refused to clear their way, Revati, who was leading the panicky cluster, answered, "We're going to see the warden. Now if you'll excuse us."

"You look frightened."

"Did something happen?"

When the young girls refused to open their mouths, Superna came to the point, "Did you hear the unexplained footsteps? Is that why you all look so unnerved and scared?"

Revati's eyes opened wide. "How do you know about the footsteps?"

"We lived in the dorm last year for a month. So, we know. We heard them every day. As if someone unseen was walking around, looking for someone."

"Oh, I see. And we kept thinking you all were doing it deliberately to scare us, that was till the footsteps entered the dorm," Mouli conveyed, rolling her eyes.

Revati nodded vigorously. "And you know, apart from the daily footsteps, Sanya faced something strange in the bathroom the first night we were here. Then, someone unseen peered at us last night. It flung down Sanya's chair too. And then we heard a scary sound, a ghostly voice . . . like someone saying kiiiiiiiiill . . ." Revati stopped as she was now breathless. Many girls standing on the stairs turned to look behind them and visibly shivered.

"Really? My God!"

"Poor you."

"You must have been frightened out of your wits."

Superna puckered her brows. "We just heard footsteps of someone in heavy boots. Those footsteps would walk through the dorm exactly at midnight and then disappear into the bathroom. Nothing more. That frightened the hell out of us."

"What did you do then?"

"First, we did exactly what you are doing. Rushed to Miss Udbala, the dragon. But she shouted at us, said we were a bunch of liars, frauds, and sent us right back to the dorm. But not before warning us against opening our mouths and spreading tales. She said we would be expelled from the college if we tried that."

Another girl said, "You know, all these days we were waiting for your reaction, wondering when you'll all realize that the dorm is haunted. But there's no point going to Udbala. She won't listen, will shout at you. And later, if you talk about it to other lecturers, she'll become problematic, trying all sorts of tricks to make your life miserable. She did that with us."

"But strangely she never enters the dorm. It is as if she is scared," Gauri, standing next to Superna, announced.

"Because she's the only one who knows why the dorm is haunted. And it is not something new," Superna elucidated.

"You mean it has a long history of a ghost living in it?"

"Or ghosts," added Gauri. "You see, the dormitory came in use only last year after remaining unused for many years. There were always rumours that it was haunted. Then the year before last after the previous principal retired, our present principal, Mrs. Bose, was appointed. She opened a few more departments, and hence, there were more students in the college. The institute was falling short of hostel accommodation, so she decided to once again bring the dormitory to use. We were the first batch accommodated in it, but after living there for a month, hearing the strange footsteps each night, we refused to even step in it. The principal had no choice but to adjust us in other rooms. Though she rubbished our claim that it was haunted."

"She needs to spend a night in it to know the reality." Revati's face contorted in anger.

"Why is the dorm haunted? Whose footsteps are these?" Sanya asked.

"Do you have any idea? Like did somebody die in it?" Mouli posed.

"Yes, I do have some info," Superna said. "Two girls were murdered here in March 1967. Two Assamese girls—Salmi and Santati were their names. It happened shortly after the dragon joined this college. It is rumoured that she

had a hand in the murders. Or maybe she was the murderer. Doesn't she look quite capable of it?"

Many fresh hostellers sucked in their breath. "Oh God! We are under a murderer's supervision?"

"But why would she do that? Why did she kill the young girls?"

"Some say they all belonged to the same area of Assam, and there was some family dispute. How the dragon came into the picture is unclear."

"But she has continued to be in the college . . ."

"She wasn't arrested?" Revati asked.

"There was no evidence against her. Like Gauri just told you, she never enters the dorm. Never ever! Isn't that evidence in itself?"

"How do you know about all this? It happened so long ago," Revati regarded Superna suspiciously. She was clearly sceptic of her claim.

Superna calmly met her eyes. "My mother was studying in this college then. She told me all about it before I joined this college. She warned me to stay away from Miss Udbala after she came to know that she was still working here. 'Never trust her,' she told me. More importantly, she told me never to come in her bad books. She is vengeful. Better to maintain distance from her."

Another girl intervened, "You'll see that most of the students know about the incident, and so does the staff. It has been passed down from year to year. So, everybody tries to keep their distance from her."

"So, the dragon has no friends?"

"Who would want to befriend such a dangerous woman?" Mouli hissed angrily.

"What did your mother tell you about the incident?" Sanya was obviously keen to get to the bottom of the horrid affair.

"Salmi and Santati were my mother's classmates. On that fateful day, the entire class had gone for a picnic, except the two of them. One of them, I believe Santati had suddenly fallen ill after eating her breakfast. Imagine, only one girl got food poisoning after eating the food that everyone else ate. Isn't that suspicious?"

"Very strange. It's like someone deliberately poisoned it."

"Exactly!"

"Then?"

"Her sister Salmi stayed behind with her. Or maybe the dragon asked her to look after her sister. Miss Udbala didn't go for the picnic either. When my mother and other girls returned late in the evening, they found the twins murdered in the dorm. Santati lay dead on her bed and Salmi was found on the bathroom floor. She had probably run there to save herself. Somebody

had mercilessly killed them—cut their throats. And Miss Udbala claimed she hadn't been to see the sisters at all, and had spent the whole day in the library. The librarian was her alibi, though she couldn't vouch for the half an hour she had taken off for lunch. She had requested Udbala to stay in the library till she returned. Only God knows what she did in that half an hour. Being lunchtime, nobody else visited the library. Udbala could have easily sneaked out to kill the girls and be back before the librarian returned."

Exclamations arose from the listeners. "Oh God!" "That's scary." "How am I going to survive when I have a butcher for my warden?"

"Why wasn't she put behind bars?" Revati clenched her teeth.

Superna responded, "Smart murderer she was! Didn't leave a single clue. This double murder was never solved."

"And, she still remained in the college."

"It is rumoured that she has the backing of someone very influential."

"So, ever since then the spirits of the murdered girls have been inhabiting the dorm and the stairs leading to it. What should we do now?" Revati turned towards her dorm mates.

Superna advised, "Speak with the principal and no one else. Get her to accommodate you elsewhere. But do it secretly. Dragon should never come to know what you all have experienced."

"Yes, otherwise she'll turn your life into hell," came another advice.

"It's she who needs to go to hell," Mouli stamped her foot in disgust and anger.

The freshers then reluctantly returned to their haunted quarters to get ready for the classes.

That evening the girls came back to their dorm a little early and in better spirits. They had had a word with the principal who was sympathetic towards their problem, though she had rubbished the 'Haunted Dorm' theory yet again. She had assured them that she would make alternate living arrangements for them as soon as possible.

There was still an hour for dinnertime. Some girls stretched on the beds to relax. A few sat down with their books to study. Sanya and a few girls joined Revati, who had by now been conferred the unspoken title of being their leader. She had presented their case in front of the principal superbly, ultimately convincing her to provide them an alternate accommodation. They had now pulled a few chairs and sat around her bed, chatting. But, they avoided talking about the uncanny that they all had experienced earlier. They were scared to discuss the matter here. Probably the ghosts were lingering around, unseen by them. Though they did wonder which one of them wore boots. Did only one ghost walk in heavy boots?

They were also full of sympathy for the girls who had been murdered right here, in this dorm—young lives snuffed out in their prime. Many questions lingered on their minds. What could they have done to suffer such terrible fate? Did they pay the price for someone else's culpability? What must the poor girls have gone through in those last moments of their lives? How cruel can a human become to kill young innocent girls mercilessly? Was Udbala capable of such a heinous act?

But one thing was indisputable—these young newcomers of the college hostel had begun to be mortally afraid of their warden.

Mouli, who was sitting with the rest, suddenly shut her eyes. "I have a strange headache," she declared. "I never get headache. I don't know what this is. I feel nauseated too."

"Go and rest. Maybe the whole affair has begun to affect you."

She walked to Sanya's bed, next to Revati's, and lay on it to remain close to the group. She didn't want to miss the talks. Then all of a sudden she gasped loudly and sat up, drawing everyone's attention. There was a sudden reaction from the girls. Some sucked in their breaths, others squealed. Mouli's face was covered with drops of blood, as if someone had spattered blood on her face. To some it seemed that blood was oozing out from the pores of her face. After the first shock Revati found her speech. "What's wrong with you, Mouli? Do you have some serious skin disease? Does it happen to you often?"

Mouli was staring at others, wondering what they were talking about. "What disease? I am perfectly healthy. There's nothing wrong with me. It's just this headache . . ." she protested.

"Then why did you sit up all of a sudden?" asked Sanya.

"I felt something wet splash on my face with a force, that's why. I am perfectly fine otherwise." The girls looked at each other and paled. Was she telling the truth?

"Go, wash your face. Immediately!" Revati directed.

Mouli got up obediently and moved towards the washroom. Many girls followed her. Some out of curiosity, others with concern.

"What was that, Revati?" Sanya queried when they both were left alone, others having followed Mouli. She looked frightened. "How can drops of blood just appear on her face like that? Not one or two but many . . . like someone had sprayed blood on her." She shook her head in bewilderment.

"Be rational, Sanya. Blood is produced inside a body, not in the air. It can't crop up just out of the blue. I think Mouli has some disease. She's hiding it from us," Revati persisted. "Remember she said she had a headache. There must be a connection . . ." Suddenly she marched to Sanya's bed to investigate. The bed was clean. There was no sign of anything anomalous. She

sat on it. Sanya followed her. "See, there's nothing here. It's all normal. Mouli is lying. She definitely has some skin disease." She patted the bed. Sayna obeyed her hesitatingly. They sat side by side for a few minutes. Then Sanya's eyes began to close. "My head feels heavy," she declared. Revati watched her recline on her bed and close her eyes.

By this time the girls who had gone to the bathroom were returning. They were clearly agitated. Mouli was with them. She was crying and shivering. Revati's attention went to them and at that precise moment she heard a hoarse ghostly whisper from somewhere very close to them, "You'll paaaaay . . ." Sanya sat up with a loud gasp. Revati took one look at her face and screamed. Sanya's face was covered in blood. Not just a few drops but dollops of it. As an automatic reaction Sanya's hand went to her face. She slowly wiped her cheek with her fingers and then checked. Her fingers were smeared in blood. She gagged. She stared at her bloodied fingers with her eyes almost bulging out of their sockets. Then her attention was drawn towards something else. She stared at something behind Revati and began to retch and shudder. Other girls, who had sensed the paranormal, rushed out of the dormitory, screaming and falling over each other. Sanya collapsed on the bed.

Revati stood frozen, stuttering and muttering incomprehensible words. She looked around. There was no one in the dorm except the two of them now. She too wanted to rush out from the hall that had gone strangely silent and cold, but she couldn't leave Sanya alone. Sound of a mocking laughter surfaced, once again from somewhere close. She jumped in fright and looked around in panic. The dorm was still stark empty. Gradually, the hollow sound rose like a wind blowing through the dry branches of a tree and filled the hall with its spookiness. 'Sheeee kiiiiilled . . . Sheeee kiiiilled.' Revati trembled and shook Sanya, trying to help her get up. "Come on, Sanya, get up. Quick. We need to get out of here. Please." She used all her strength and pushed Sanya up to a sitting position. Sanya sat like a rag doll, limp and lifeless, blood dripping down her face, streaking down her neck and trickling into her blouse. Though she made a scary figure, Revati stood by her, shaking her hard to get her to act. But Sanya only trembled and uttered some guttural sounds.

The other girls of the dormitory reached the grounds. Their shrieks, shivering bodies, and pale faces spoke it all. Miss Udbala was walking towards the East Wing hostel after her cup of evening tea at the staff cafeteria. Attracted by the commotion she reached the panic-stricken girls. "Why are you all creating ruckus in the campus?" she reproached them. But the girls were too agitated to be affected by her scolding. They tried describing what had happened all at once. Though things were not absolutely clear, Udbala visibly paled. She screamed to cover up her qualms, "I want all of you back in

the hostel immediately." But the girls were in no mood to pay her heed today. Realizing it was useless talking to Miss Udbala, a few girls rushed to the principal's office, to report what they had witnessed. Along with a few college lecturers the kind lady immediately hurried towards the East Wing hostel. By now a large group had collected outside the hostel. Miss Udbala was trying to sneak away, when the college principal reached there.

"Revati and Sanya are still in the dormitory, Ma'am," Nitya rushed to inform the principal, Mrs. Bose, in a panicky voice.

"They are in danger. Ma'am, please do something," Mouli cried.

"Come with me," Mrs. Bose looked at Miss Udbala and spoke in her authoritative voice. The other two lecturers responded. They ran towards the entrance. Miss Udbala didn't budge an inch. Mrs. Bose stopped at the door and shouted, "Miss Udbala Bora. What's the matter with you? You are the warden of this hostel, and responsible for the safety of the girls. Come fast. We need to check what's happening in the dorm."

Left with no choice Miss Udbala followed the principal. The crowd of the college girls that had collected outside the East Wing of the hostel noted her reluctance as she trudged with heavy steps towards her superior. The group disappeared inside the building. None of the students made any attempt to follow them. None dared. The faculty members rushed up the stairs and halted at the dormitory door, huffing and puffing. They noted Revati struggling to make Sanya get off the bed.

Mrs. Bose rushed to their aid, so did the other two lecturers. Miss Udbala stood at the door, refusing to enter the dorm. The three elderly ladies were taken aback by Sanya's condition. "How did she get so much blood on her face, Revati?" the principal demanded. Both Revati and Sanya were trembling like dry autumn leaves in a heavy breeze. "Miss Udbala, what are you doing outside the door? Come and help the girls," Mrs. Bose's voice rumbled through the ice cold dormitory.

Udbala stared with trepidation where Sanya sat—on her bed. It was at the same spot where young Santati, very ill and helpless, had been mercilessly murdered. Udbala stood outside the dormitory, utterly reluctant to enter. "Miss Udbala," shouted Mrs. Bose again, unable to understand why the lady was behaving so oddly. She was clearly angry with her. Left with no choice, Miss Udbala stepped in, hesitated at the door for a moment and then quickly walked towards the group. She had barely taken ten steps, when the group in the dorm watched in shock as she began to levitate in the air. Someone invisible was pulling her up, off the floor. She floated for a short distance and then fell on the floor with a loud thump. A scream escaped her lips. Her eyes almost popped out of their sockets and mouth opened wide as she stared in

extreme fright at something in front of her, something that others failed to perceive. "Sss-so-rr-y," she tried to mouth. "You . . . paaaaayy . . . kiiiiiiiiill . . ." Eerie vibrations arose in the dormitory making everybody's blood run cold. Mrs. Bose and the two lecturers looked around in terror to locate the source of the sound. With tears streaming down her cheeks, Revati wrapped her arms around Sanya, trying to protect her. Sanya still sat immobile. Stuporous. Then the terrified group watched in horror as Miss Udbala's two arms shot out straight in front. She began to be dragged towards the bathroom, once again by the invisible entities. Blood began to pour out from her mouth and dribble down her neck. She went limp. Mrs. Bose, now frozen to the spot, screamed the loudest. Miss Udbala was lugged towards the bathroom and then into it. The bathroom door closed with a loud bang behind her.

Gathering whatever wits left, the principal, the lecturers, and Revati together lifted Sanya up and rushed out of the haunted dorm. Sanya kept whispering, "Blood, blood . . . Necks . . . Gho . . . gho . . ." Sanya was the only person other than Miss Udbala to have seen Santati's and Salmi's ghosts with blood dripping down their slit necks, as they dragged Miss Udbala away. That was the last blow to her brain that went into an irreparable shock.

Those were the last sounds Sanya ever uttered. She had been so traumatized that she lost her speech and became a mute unresponsive body for the rest of her life . . . exactly like the stone statue that Revati had seen in her dream.

Once outside the building, Mrs. Bose composed herself, and sent a few guards to the dormitory, to help Miss Udbala. They were kept in the dark regarding the disturbing occurrence others had witnessed there, but instructed to check the toilets. When the guards reached the dormitory, Miss Udbala was beyond any help. She lay dead in the first cubicle of the toilets, exactly at the spot where Salmi had been murdered twenty-two years ago. Blood was oozing from her gaping mouth, her tongue was hanging out of her mouth, and her eyes were wide open and bulging. It was a horrifying spectacle. It seemed that her spirit had been wrenched out of her body.

Providence had played its role. She had paid for her karma.

Perhaps, except for the ghosts and Miss Udbala, no one had an idea that the murders of the young girls had been committed at the behest of Upendra Gohain, the murdered girls' father's cousin, and now Sanya's grandfather. When Upendra had initiated the gruesome affair, he had never thought that one day he too would have to wallow in pain, seeing his darling granddaughter turned into a stone. And only then he would understand that it was easier to inflict pain on others than having to bear it oneself.

A LITTLE GIRL'S MISSION

The west coast of Australia was reeling under a heat wave. Throughout the last week of December, the temperatures in Canberra had remained above forty. It was the hottest Christmas that people could remember. "Global warming," people said, wiping their sweaty brows as they greeted each other. In Lucy's house, a different kind of heat wave was in progress. To escape it, she was here at her friend Suzie's house, playing with her dollhouse in their cool basement.

"Lucy, be careful. Don't put my new doll on the floor. It's my best. You know, Momma took one whole week to make it." Suzie was a few months older than Lucy, therefore patronizing towards her, and Peter, her younger brother.

"Sorry, Suzie." Lucy quickly picked up the doll.

"You know, I don't let Peter touch it at all. He'll spoil it in a day." She had the indulgent tone of a big sister. "But you can play with it—you are my special friend."

Lucy Smith nodded and smiled gratefully as she kept the doll in her lap and pretended to put it to sleep. Just then Mrs. Sarah Wilson walked into the room.

"Lunch's ready, Suzie darling. And where is Peter? Haven't seen him for quite a while."

Lucy instantly responded, "Mrs. Wilson, he's playing in his room, under the bed. He said he was Spiderman, fighting the evil inside a cave." She giggled, and this highlighted the cute dimples on her cheeks. "Spiderman in a cave! He doesn't know that Spiderman climbs up the walls."

Sarah smiled genially. "Oh, he's not yet four. He'll learn these things

gradually."

Sarah Wilson was a housewife. She had left her job after Peter was born. She wasn't one of the career-oriented ambitious women. A happy family was all she ever desired. And, she was ready to confer some pampering on Lucy too. She badly needed it. God alone knew what the poor little girl was undergoing.

The afternoon got darker as a thunderstorm rolled in. The windows rattled. Peter came running and clung on to his mother's legs. "Look at Spiderman," Suzie laughed at her brother, "he's scared of the thunder."

Lucy tittered. "How will you rescue people from the evil forces, Peter?" Peter made a face at them. He didn't like being teased by the girls. They pretended to be oversmart.

"It's going to rain, Peter. We'll get relief from the heat. Isn't that nice?" His mother smiled and ruffled his hair. "Come, children. I have some cool gazpacho soup and the leftover meat pie from the Christmas lunch."

"Yay! I love meat pie," Peter hollered.

"Would you like to lunch with us, Lucy dear?" asked Sarah.

Lucy shyly nodded. There was no lunch at home anyway. Her mom and dad had left in the morning without saying a word to each other, or to her. She had made a vegemite sandwich and had swallowed it down with a glass of cold milk. Then changing her clothes she had come straight here, to be with Suzie and her family. It felt so relaxing and safe here, in Suzie's house. Why wasn't it like this in her house too—love and happiness? There was nothing but anger, hate, arguments, quarrels, terrible fights. Like last night, her mom and dad had argued again and then her dad had slapped her mom so hard that she had heard it even through the closed door of her room. She had heard more screaming, and things hitting against the wooden floor. What were they hitting each other with? Furniture? She had wondered and shivered. They might hurt each other badly. She had blocked her ears to shut the horrible voices out. What else could she do? She wanted them to be together. Always. She loved them both.

This time, there were no Christmas presents too. There was no Christmas in their house. The shopping had remained in the box, packed and lying in a corner—lost and sad like her. Her dad had brought a tree. But the day they had planned to decorate the tree, he had kept on talking to someone on the phone. Her mom had got exasperated and had snatched the phone out of his hand and thrown it down. It had broken. Then there had been a fierce fight between the two. They used such horrible words for each other, pushed each other, and then her dad pulled her mom's hair and threw her down, on the floor, next to the phone. "I'm sorry I married you, okay, I'm sorry. I am now

trying to set it right by eliminating you from my life. That's all. I want to get rid of the filth and clean my life," he had screamed. Her mom had kept sitting on the floor, whimpering and sobbing. Lucy had seen it all. This time nobody had bothered to tell her to go to her room. She had sat frozen on the sofa, shocked and shivering. She had felt so terribly scared, and lonesome like the Christmas tree that stood in the corner—shrivelled and morose.

She understood everything. Her dad was having an affair with some other woman and wanted to leave her mom. But her mom insisted that she still loved him, didn't want to separate from him.

Why has Dad become like this? A monster. He used to be so loving till sometime back —bought me toys, took me for ice-cream treats, and often to play or skate in the park. Now it is as if the devil has got inside him. I am scared. There was no one she could speak with except Suzie. Lucy had tried discussing her sordid matters with her, but she had not been encouraging. "It happens, you know. Very common! Haven't you seen in so many movies where the man doesn't love his wife but someone else?" she had said like some intellectual, and trotted off.

Lucy wished the Christmas summer holidays to be over and school to begin. Going to school was a big breather. So was being at Suzie's house.

Suzie's mom was such a kind and gentle lady. She was never harsh with her children, never screamed and shouted, unlike her own folks. Her father too was so gentle.

Why wasn't I born here, as Suzie's sister? Our names rhyme too; Lucy and Suzie. "Lucy and Suzie . . ." Lucy whispered as she got up to follow Suzie and her mom to the dining room, with gloomy thoughts invading her young impressionistic mind.

Both the families lived in a quiet lane on Deakin district of Canberra, south west of the Capital Hill, with the peaks of the Brindabella and Tidbinbilla ranges offering panoramic view for its residents. Smiths lived down the lane, six houses away from Wilsons. The couple had shifted here with their daughter only a year ago.

Sarah Wilson had met Lucy's mother, Dora Smith, only twice—once during the Halloween, when the children had gone demanding trick or treat to the houses along with the mothers, and next time just outside on the road. She had found her a pretty and gentle lady. Why her husband was dating someone else she couldn't figure out.

The summer holidays got over and schools opened once again. Life became tolerable for Lucy. Though she seldom saw her father now. Many a time, he didn't even return home at night. Her mother became increasingly silent. She hardly spoke to her and cried a lot. Lucy was terribly sorry for her,

and worried too. A frightening creepy silence had replaced the violent fights, like a hush preceding a deadly storm.

Autumn arrived in March. Laughter and smell of barbeques exuded from the neighbours' gardens. But, Lucy's house remained enveloped in a sad eerie silence. The Easter holidays came and went as languidly for Lucy as her life had become. The only memorable part of the Easter holidays was a day long picnic with Suzie and her family in the National Botanical Gardens. She hadn't been on an outing like that for a long time. The trees growing on gradient slopes looked so beautiful with their leaves having acquired hues of new shades—greens, yellows, oranges, reds—as if they had dressed up to bid farewell to the world. While Suzie's parents sat drinking wine and Peter ran around the sculpted dinosaurs, both the little girls went for a walk. The barks of the gum trees had acquired amazing patterns and colours—turquoise, cyan, honeydew. There was a breathtaking display of wild flowers in the spectacular bush. The girls ran around them and around the fern trees, the grass trees, the banksias, the golden wattles, and mistletoes. Flocks of shrieking cockatoos hovered above. Brilliant colours of rosella gleamed through the foliage. It was such fun! They even spotted a mother kangaroo with a joey in her pouch and hopped after her.

Back home, Lucy quietly slipped into her room. As usual, nobody greeted her, nobody inquired about her day. No one in the house cared for each other anymore, and it broke her heart. Her dad was unusually home, and sat watching TV. He didn't turn to say hello. Lucy's mom was in the bedroom, probably sulking. The bedroom was exclusively her mom's now. Her dad had been sleeping in the TV room for quite sometime. Their once warm, loving family was now lost to the cold world of conflict. Lucy hated the woman her dad was seeing. She held her responsible for their misery.

By April end, the temperature began to fall. Winter arrived all at once. By now, Lucy's parents had drifted apart, and both of them knew that the love and warmth in their relationship would never return. The cold was having its toll on Lucy too. She had developed this rankling cough, which was being conveniently neglected by her parents.

Lucy began to spend every evening with Suzie and her family, sharing their evening supper. But her cough was getting worse and that began to alarm Sarah. She hoped it wasn't infectious. After watching her suffer for a few days, Sarah decided to talk to Dora Smith about it. She was even a bit annoyed. How could the parents so utterly neglect their child? She called up Dora and requested her to take Lucy to a doctor. "I think, Mrs. Smith, the cough is not a simple one, and it's getting worse."

"I know it. Thank you for your concern, but I have already taken an appointment with a doctor for tomorrow." Dora sounded rude. Sarah knew she was lying.

Thereafter, Lucy stopped coming to their house. After about a week Suzie brought up the topic. "Mom, what's wrong with Lucy? She doesn't come to play with me anymore. She's not even coming to school these days." Sarah immediately called up to inquire and was told by Dora Smith that Lucy was running a fever, but should be fine in a couple of days as she was under medication. But to Susie's dismay Lucy never came to play with her again. Neither did she go to school. Repeated phone calls to her went unanswered.

Winters passed. Spring arrived in September. The month-long annual Floriade Flower Festival began. Wilsons decided to take the children to see the vibrant hues of the exotic flowers at the festival. "Mom, I wish we could take Lucy along. I still wonder why she refuses to be in touch with us," Suzie remarked despondently.

Sarah nodded and immediately picked up the phone to place a call. The bell continued to ring. There was no response as usual. A little worried about her daughter's friend, she promised Suzie that they would visit her house.

When the next day both of them walked to Lucy's house, they saw a big lock on the door.

"Hello, Sarah, seen you after a long time." Sarah and Suzie turned to find Smiths' immediate neighbour, Mrs. Jane Watson, standing at the gate of her house.

"Oh hello, Jane. We have come to see Lucy. She's Suzie's friend, you know."

Suzie instantly voiced, "I haven't seen her for a long time, Mrs. Watson. She hasn't been coming to school either. Do you know where she is?"

"Don't you know? Her parents separated a few months ago. Lucy and her mother moved out of the house. I don't know where they went."

"Oh!" Disappointment was apparent in Suzie's tone. "She didn't even come to say goodbye."

Jane smiled weakly. "When they left, Lucy seemed very sick. She could barely walk. When I expressed my concern, her mother said she would be taken care of."

"So, does that mean nobody lives in this house now?" Sarah eyed the big padlock once again.

"A new woman has shifted in with the man. I've had a glimpse of her a few times with Mr. Smith. She stays aloof; doesn't mix with the neighbours at all."

Suzie and her mom returned home. Suzie remained silent for a long time

and Sarah tried cheering her up. "It's okay, Suzie darling. That's what life is about. You meet new people, you lose old friends." Suzie hid her face in her arms to hide her tears. "Don't worry, my darling, you'll make many new friends. You already have many friends in school. You can invite them home. Don't feel sad for Lucy now. Just pray she's happy, wherever she is."

"That's the problem, Mom. I'm worried for Lucy. She used to share things with me and there were so many problems in her life. She wasn't happy. On top of this, she fell so sick."

"I understand your concern. She's a very sweet girl. I am sure her mother is taking good care of her."

"Actually, Mom, I keep dreaming of her. A lot. Yesterday night too she came in my dream. She said she wished to come back to play with me, live with me. But she's very far now, finding it difficult to return. But, she said she is trying her best."

"Hmm . . ."

"Trying her best? Mom, is she planning to run away and come to us?"

"I hope not. And these are just dreams, Suzie darling. Don't bother about them."

"But they feel so real. Like Lucy is just standing next to my bed and talking. I feel it."

"Forget about her, Suzie. She is out of our lives now. God alone knows where and how she is."

Months passed. Suzie became immersed in her life, though memory of Lucy didn't fade. She kept appearing to her in dreams. Then one day, at the dinner table, Peter all of a sudden stated, "Lucy has come back."

Suzie's eyes widened with interest. "How do you know?"

"I saw her standing in our garden. Under our plum tree."

"When?" Suzie was curious and excited.

"In the evening, when I was playing with my Superman army in the porch," Peter spoke through his mouth full.

"Why didn't she come inside? Did she say anything to you? Did you say hello to her?" Suzie asked, disappointed.

"I did. But she never replied. Funny! She just stood there, like your limp doll. And then after a while she was gone."

"Since when has she become shy of coming to our house? She could've come to say hello to me, at least."

"Perhaps she has come to see her father, and didn't have time to come here," Sarah inferred.

"She's my friend. It's not fair! She's here and I didn't even know." Suzie

had tears in her eyes.

"You can go and meet her tomorrow. It's Saturday," Sarah proposed, planting a kiss on Suzie's cheek. "We'll go right after breakfast. Happy?"

"I don't want to see her father. I don't like him," Suzie pouted.

"It's okay. He won't harm you. I am coming along."

The next day, soon after breakfast, Suzie and her mom marched down the lane to Smiths' house. The door was opened after repeated, insistent knocks. Lucy's father stood at the door, cold and frosty. He had salt and pepper stubble growing on his face, as if he hadn't shaved for quite some time. They could see a skinny lady sitting on a dining chair with her back towards them. She didn't even turn to greet them. "Hello, Mr. Smith. I'm Mrs. Wilson, your neighbour. And this is my daughter Suzie—"

"I know. What do you want?"

Sarah was taken aback by the man's rudeness. Suzie didn't like his tone towards her mother, and boldly stepped in front of her, as if to protect her. "Mr. Smith, I'm Lucy's friend. Have come to meet her. I believe she's visiting you."

"Visiting me? Who told you that?" The man had turned visibly pale.

"My little brother met her yesterday evening," Suzie stood smugly with her hands locked behind her.

Mr. Smith stared at her horrified, his jaw dropped in disbelief. But the lady sitting on the chair came alive. She abruptly turned to face them. A thin oblong face appeared haggard, worn out, and unpleasantly drained of colour. Her eyes seemed wild, dilated in fright, and she definitely seemed unwell. There was clear panic on her face. "I told you, Dan, I told you so. She is here. But you just wouldn't believe me."

Mr. Smith paid her no heed. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Wilson, but there's surely been some mistake. My Lucy died six months ago of severe pneumonia. We buried her in Gungahlin Cemetery. Now, if you'll excuse us." The door was shut in their faces. Sarah and Suzie stood gaping at the door. They could hear the lady's high pitched screaming. Sarah held Suzie's hand and gently pulled her away. Suzie was crying softly.

"Mama, Mr. Smith is lying."

"No, my darling, don't say that. Why would a father lie about his daughter's death?"

"But Peter saw her yesterday. If Lucy died six months ago, then who did Peter see?" Suzie spoke through her sobs.

"He must have seen someone else." Sarah's heart was racing and her legs were unsteady. But she must pacify her daughter. "You know Peter well—his

attention span is so short. He must have glanced at some girl standing there and taken her for Lucy," Sarah tried explaining, though she was extremely perturbed and shaken. Lucy was very distinct, with her auburn curly locks that fell all over her forehead and her shoulders, and a cute freckled face. "And, Suzie, please don't mention Lucy being dead to Peter. He's too young to absorb such information."

Suzie nodded. "He won't even understand what being dead means." Then after a short silence she spoke, more to herself, "Lucy's been coming in my dreams, almost like she was there, standing next to my bed."

"Shhhh . . . Don't think about it, dear. Dreams are not real."

A fortnight later Mrs. Jane Watson visited Sarah unexpectedly. Her brows were creased in worry and she appeared highly distressed. "Do you have some time, Sarah? I have come to discuss something serious with you. I didn't know who else to approach."

"Sure, Jane. Come in. Let me get you a cup of coffee first." As the women sat in the parlour with their cups of hot coffee, Mrs. Watson immediately came to the point.

"Sarah, there's something strange going on in Smiths' house."

"Strange? In what way?"

"You know, often at night, the lady, Mr. Smith's live-in partner, shrieks—terribly, like, like, in pain, or, or in fright."

"That's pretty strange." Sarah nodded. She was trying to hide her increasing anxiety and fear.

"It was three nights ago, I think. I was tossing and turning, unable to sleep when I heard this woman shriek. Then the door opened with a bang and I heard voices outside. I got up to check what was going on. The woman was standing outside in her flimsy nightdress, shivering, and the man was coaxing her to go back in. 'No, she's there. I can't stand it any longer. She's eerie,' she cried. She was shivering like a leaf. The man shook his head and said something, but I couldn't catch that. He then wrapped his arms around her and guided her in."

"Quite strange." Sarah could barely manage to keep her hands from shaking.

"You know, Sarah, till then I had thought Mr. Smith was a sadist, that he tortured her. I was even planning to go to the police. But, that night it appeared a different matter altogether. The woman is downright selfish, can't tolerate the child visiting them. She wants her to be sent away. Imagine creating so much ruckus over that sweet little girl coming to her own house!" She took a sip of coffee with great relish, gratified with the conclusion she had

drawn. Her eyes shone like a detective's after solving a tough murder mystery.

Sarah shrugged her shoulders uneasily. She wondered which little girl Jane was talking about. She hoped it wasn't what she was thinking. "Jane, I have no idea what's going on in that household. Though, when Suzie and I went to see Mr. Smith, he seemed a bit disturbed, unhappy. But, then it is to be expected."

"Expected? Why?"

"You know, his daughter Lucy is dead. She died a few months ago of pneumonia. So naturally the father—"

"What? What did you say? Lucy's dead?"

"Yes, that's what Mr. Smith told us."

"Not possible." Jane's eyes now bulged out of their sockets. "I, I saw Lucy, yesterday, standing outside the door of their house." The poor lady had lost all colour on her face. "Then, she, she went inside, and the woman began to shriek." Jane covered her face. There was total disbelief in her eyes. "Oh my God! I even heard girlish giggles, and wondered what was going on. And now you are saying she's been dead for a while."

"Are you sure you saw Lucy and, and not somebody else?"

"It was Lucy, hundred percent! Do you think I wouldn't recognize the girl who has been my neighbour for more than a year?" Jane was more shocked than upset. "Oh my God, oh my God." The cup of coffee rattled on the saucer as her hands trembled. She kept it down and took out a handkerchief from her bag to wipe her face. She was sweating despite the cold. "It's so strange. Never in life have I experienced something like this. Oh my God! Do you mean I saw a ghost? I'm scared to go back even to my house now, knowing there's a ghost next door. And now I know why Lucy looked somewhat different, ghostly pale. Oh my God!"

"Don't, Jane! You don't need to be afraid. We were good to Lucy when she was alive. She has no grudge against us." Sarah's statement was self-consolatory.

"Do you mean Lucy has come back from the dead?"

"I think so. It appears she has not been able to forgive the woman who had made hers and her mother's lives miserable. She has not been able to rest in peace."

"What should we do now, Sarah? My mind is not working. Lucy's ghost is next door!" Jane took a few quick breaths and shivered.

"I think we should discuss the matter with the priest this Sunday, after the service," Sarah suggested. She didn't reveal about Peter having seen Lucy's ghost too. That would be too fearful for the poor lady to absorb. But it worried her now to know that Lucy's ghost had been here, in her garden. And what about Suzie's dreams? *Are they really dreams?* Sarah's hands had gone cold,

so had her whole body. It was imperative that they consult the priest for the wandering soul's salvation. And very soon.

"Yes, yes, that we should do." Jane stood up and walked to the door. "I must go home now. I have an appointment with my dentist." She hesitated at the door. "Sarah, I'm really, really frightened to walk alone, all by myself."

"Come, Jane, I'll walk you halfway."

After the Sunday service at the church, Sarah and Jane waited for everyone to depart. They then approached the priest. He patiently listened to them. "Sorry, ladies, I can't barge into somebody's house without being invited, that too to exorcize a wandering spirit of a child. Moreover, we are not even sure if the ghost exists. One time sighting can also be a mistake. Let's wait."

"What about the shrieks, and, and the disturbance caused for the neighbours, Father?" Jane protested.

"Listen ladies, I can only act if the people directly involved approach me. How can I march into a house and tell the man, 'I have come to expel the ghost of your daughter from your house'? Eh? Will he accept that?" He sighed looking at the fallen faces of the ladies. "Alright. If there is even one more sighting by any one of you, I will get in touch with the experts. Frankly, I have no expertise in exorcism."

Jane and Sarah returned home, disappointed. The angry spirit of a child was hovering over the neighbourhood. It was scaring the hell out of them, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Soon the entire neighbourhood realized that something was awry in Smith household. The lady, a shrunken skeleton by now, would often be seen on the street in her shabby nightdress, her hair matted and her blank eyes staring into the void. Many a time Mr. Smith was noted persuading her to return home to which the lady would resist. The terrible shrieks at night continued. Jane visited Sarah often to report the happenings.

It was pouring heavily on the day Jane rushed to Sarah's house in urgency. She was drenched to the skin despite carrying an umbrella. One look at her face and Sarah knew something was seriously wrong. After offering her a towel, Sarah seated her in the parlour and rushed to put the kettle on, to make her a hot beverage.

Jane followed her into the kitchen. "I saw her again today, Sarah." She leaned against the counter and closed her eyes. "She is trying to kill the poor lady."

"How?" Sarah's eyes expanded in fear.

"I was at the window watching the downpour, when the woman rushed out, in her skinny negligée in this cold. Oh God! You should have seen the fright on her face. The next moment Lucy was there too, behind her. Then the woman's hair stood straight behind her as if somebody was pulling at them. The woman shrieked in intense pain. I became immobile. I'm telling you, Sarah, she's killing her—killing her slowly, wickedly."

"What can we do, Jane? Let's not get involved." Sarah bit her lip and fidgeted on the chair.

"But I'm already involved," Jane cried. "Lucy saw me. My window was barely twenty feet away. And she slowly turned to stare at me. There was anger in her big hollow eyes. It was creepy, chilling to the bone." Jane covered her cheeks with her palms and shook her head. "I trembled. I wanted to withdraw but fear had me glued to the floor. And, and then she opened her mouth, menacingly, bigger and bigger, as if she would swallow me alive. There was nothing but hollow blackness inside her mouth." Jane trembled. "Oh my God! She scared the hell out of me. She knew I was watching her—and, and so she told me to mind my own business or . . . I am frightened, Sarah, so frightened. What shall I do? What if she grows a grudge against me too?" Jane moaned.

Sarah handed her a cup of coffee, and realized Jane's hands were shivering. Her own heart was racing. *Poor Jane, and poor Smith's woman* , she thought as they both shifted to the parlour. Jane continued, "Then as soon as the woman dashed back inside, followed by the ghost, I picked up my umbrella and rushed to you. It was too much for me to take. I didn't want to be alone in the house." She slumped on the sofa. "See, my legs are still trembling. I feel weak."

Sarah held her hand reassuringly. "Drink your coffee. You'll feel better." After a little thought she added, "Let's see the priest again and request him to do something about it." Jane nodded fervently. "Tomorrow perhaps?"

The next day when Sarah rang up Jane to ask her to go to meet the priest, she reported that probably they wouldn't need to. "The woman is gone. Mr. Smith accompanied her in an ambulance. I had stepped outside to throw my trash in the bin when it happened."

"Oh, so she is going to be admitted in a hospital?"

"In a mental asylum. I saw the ambulance. It belonged to Callan Park Hospital for the Insane."

"Oh!"

Both the women felt sad but relieved. This was conceivably the end of the

nightmare. Lucy's ghost had accomplished its mission and now would go where it belonged.

Peace returned in the quiet neighbourhood. Only whispers behind closed doors sustained for a while. A month later, Jane came to Sarah to deliver another news. "Lucy's mother, Dora, has shifted back to her house. The couple seems to have reconciled. Isn't that wonderful?"

"That's great news, Jane. Thank God, Mr. Smith has finally realized her importance in his life," Sarah beamed.

"Maybe he loves her deeply, but was lured away by the other woman's wily charm," Jane voiced disdainfully.

"If you love someone deeply, you remain steadfast." Sarah put down her cup of coffee, twirling her wedding ring. "Nevertheless, I am happy for Dora. Poor woman! She unnecessarily suffered so much. If the couple hadn't separated, and this Smith fellow had been more sensible, perhaps their child would have been alive. I hope Lucy's soul is at peace now."

Jane rested her hands on her lap and lowered her head to pray. "Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them." Sarah instantly joined in, "May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen." The prayer gave them relief, like a heavy burden lifted—a difficult task accomplished. They hoped that their prayer had reached the soul of the child to its eternal peace in heaven.

That evening after dinner Peter and Suzie were, as usual, in the parlour. Suzie read her story book while Peter played with his Superman toys. It was a relaxed evening. Sarah had given James the full report of the Smith household affairs. James was all smiles. "All's well that ends well," he remarked. They sat in the sitting room sipping chartreuse liqueur. John McLaughlin's jazz instrumental music softly drifted through the record player and floated in the room. After a while James stood up. "Sarah darling, I'm really tired. It was a very hectic day at work today. Going to bed. Are you coming?"

"In some time, dear. I am enjoying the music. McLaughlin is amazing. Love listening to him." She closed her eyes and rested her head on the sofa back. She was still immersed in the world of music when she opened her eyes to glance at the clock. It was eight-thirty, much past children's sleeping time. "Suzie, Peter," she called out. "It's pretty late. Time to sleep, dears. Suzie, pack your bag before going to bed, and hurry."

A few minutes passed. Sarah then heard Suzie ticking off her little brother. "Petes, off you go. Haven't you heard Mom saying it's bedtime?"

"Okay, big bully. Going!"

Sarah heard pitter-patter of Peter's little feet heading towards his room.

She smiled. Her children were such darlings. Never gave her any trouble. She slumped her head back on the sofa and once again closed her eyes. She felt so peaceful. Life had been so kind to her. It was so fortunate to have a loving husband and lovely children. Everybody was not so fortunate.

She could now hear Peter's pitter-patter heading towards the sitting room. She opened her eyes yet again. Peter was standing at the door. 'What now,' Sarah wanted to ask but before that Peter grumbled through his pouted mouth, "Mom, send Lucy to her house. How can I sleep with her sitting on my bed?"

Sarah shot upright on the sofa, her eyes popping out of the sockets. She stared at Peter in disbelief. "MOM," Peter called, baffled by his mother's reaction. Sarah sat frozen, immobilized by terror, for the apparition was now posted right behind Peter—distinctly Lucy but a mere ghostly shadow of her original self. Scary, sunken, dark holes were ostensible where once sparkled lovely blue eyes. A contented smile playing on her pale translucent face chilled Sarah to her bones.

That night, the residents shivered inside their houses as a woman's chilling scream resounded through the air, shattering the silence of the street. The ghost reacted by opening her mouth, wider and wider, revealing a dark infinite hollowness. Streaks of sweat began to pour down Sarah's face. Peter, already unnerved by the scream, watched horrified as his mother slumped down on the sofa.

THE BLACK WALLS

Dhruv had received the pepperoni pizza he had ordered. He had planned to watch a movie and eat his favourite pizza. He was alone in the house—bored and upset. Both his housemates, Chirag and Aakash, who worked in the same company, were working till late tonight and eating their dinner at their office's coffee shop. They were his best friends from college, now together in the same city for the past two years, sharing their accommodation and lives once again.

Dhruv switched on the TV and had barely sat on the sofa when the screen went blank. Some weird screeching sounds escaped through it. Dhruv frowned. It shouldn't happen to a new set, just a month old, though it had been happening too often lately. The day before, a technician had come to check, but he hadn't been able to find any fault. In his presence the machine had worked perfectly well. The technician had looked at him as if he was the most proficient liar of the planet.

Dhruv got up in a huff and raised his fisted hand to bang the annoying set. "Go away." The growling voice was crisp clear. Was it the TV? He let his hand drop limply and looked around. Something in the house had begun to make him uncomfortable. He couldn't pinpoint, but time and again he had felt a presence here. As if he was being observed, especially when he was alone. It was a weird and creepy feeling. And now this voice . . .

The TV suddenly came alive, making him jump out of his brooding. He heaved a sigh of relief and came back to his seat. He had taken just a bite of the pizza when the screen went blank again. Annoyed, he gritted his teeth, kept the pizza box on the side table and got up to whack the TV. One bump and the set released a strange sound, not the irritating screechy sound made by

a bad gadget, but almost like a human scream. *What was that?* Dhruv was getting unnerved. He took two steps back. The screen was completely black, not even snowy. And then he saw it—a human figure, a silhouette on the part of TV not covered by his body. He realized it was somebody's image. He immediately turned to see who was behind him in the room. But the room was empty. With his eyes popping out, he turned back towards the screen. The shadow appeared again, but it had moved. It was now on his other side. Dhruv stood frozen. He didn't dare turn to check. His heart was racing. The shadow slowly dissolved. A sudden whacking sound made him turn, slowly, cautiously. The box of pizza lay on the carpet, its contents scattered all over. Dhruv barely stayed to put on his slippers and then dashed out of the house. When he reached the road, he realized his legs were shivering and sweat was dripping down his face. He wiped his face with his shirtsleeve and sat on the roadside pavement gathering his nerves.

Ever since he had shifted to this apartment with his two friends almost a month ago, there had been a lot of problems. Today in the morning when he was ironing his new shirt there was a blast in the wire of their new electric iron and then it caught fire. So did his shirt. Never in life he had seen something like this happen. Fortunately, it was a cotton shirt, not one of those synthetic mix, nevertheless his favourite. He had the presence of mind to instantly pull out the plug and snuff the fire with his hands. His hands got minor burns. But had he delayed, the can of petrol sitting next to it would have caught fire too, and burst like a bomb. Silly of Aakash to try dry-clean clothes at home. *I must get rid of the petrol canister . Else it will kill us.*

Something strange was going on, for sure. Things were not working properly; like the TV set, many gadgets had started giving them trouble. But why? And now he was hearing strange sounds too. Dhruv shook his head to eliminate these morbid thoughts invading his mind and tried to think about his latest office assignments. It was of little help. When Chirag and Aakash came back half an hour later, he was still sitting outside, pale and panicky.

Next day was Saturday. At the breakfast table in their large kitchen, Dhruv once again narrated the experience to his friends, adding details, "Yaar, it was so scary, that figure on the screen. I was sure someone was standing behind me. But when I turned—"

"Come on, Dhruv," Aakash scoffed at him. "It could be an image that the TV had picked. It was inside it—blurry and black—and not outside, silly."

"It wasn't blurry and it appeared twice. And, what about my pizza falling flat on the floor?"

"Don't be a chicken, Dhruv, you must have kept the box carelessly, half

hanging out of the table, and the gravity did its job," Chirag explained with a sardonic smile.

"Kept my pepperoni pizza carelessly? My precious dinner? Are you joking?" Dhruv was annoyed at his friends for not believing him. Then his eyes widened as he recalled something. "I now remember—the sofa was visible on the screen, and the window too. The shadow, the human figure, was in front of the sofa, close to my pizza."

"Enough, Dhruv. Don't exaggerate things," Chirag said, thumping the table. "Don't make up stories to scare us. And who believes in the supernatural these days? Eh? Nobody!" Chirag got up from the table in a huff and went to get stuff out from the fridge. "Oh God, what's happening in this house? Now the fridge has conked off. There is something wrong with the electric wiring here. We must speak with the landlord."

"Hmm . . . I think you're right," Aakash spoke through his mouth full, as he munched on his toast.

"Okay, guys, the milk will go bad. And we have some mangoes getting ready to rot. Anyone for some mango shake?"

"Sure," Aakash said. Dhruv half-heartedly gave a thumbs up, keeping his glum face intact.

Chirag cut the mangoes and put them in the mixer. He then added three glasses of milk. Meanwhile, Aakash got up to check the switches and sockets where the fridge was connected. Dhruv ate his cereal and quietly watched them. As soon as Chirag switched on the mixer, the lid popped up and hit him on his forehead with such a force that he shrieked. The milk and chopped mangoes zoomed out in a spluttering fountain, covering his face and clothes and making a mess on the floor. Aakash couldn't help laughing at the spectacle Chirag made—standing dazed with milk and mangoes dripping down his face. Dhruv stared at him with a frown. "How did that happen? The mixer wasn't too full and everything in it was cold. What made it blow up like this?" Chirag quickly washed his face at the kitchen sink and then rushed to change. Aakash tore a few paper towels to clean the floor. Dhruv jumped up to help. There was a big patch of the splatter on the kitchen wall. Dhruv stared at the distinct shape—a man's face. It was like somebody had sketched a side profile of a young man—wavy hair, sunken eyes, bushy eyebrows, sharp nose. "What is this, Aakash?" he whispered.

Without bothering to see what Dhruv was pointing at, Aakash turned and cleaned the mess from the wall. Dhruv brought a mop and cleaned the floor. His frown had deepened. *What is happening isn't normal.* He wished his friends would believe him before something serious happened.

Chirag returned to the kitchen after a quick shower and a fresh change of

clothes. He sat down on the chair and blew out a whistle. A red, lumpy mark was clearly visible on his forehead. "I don't understand. It's quite weird." He had a quizzical look on his face. "I had just touched the button, not even pressed it, when everything blew up. I have called the electrician to check all the points. He'll be here in an hour."

"Great. But this house has started to bother me. We've been here only for a month, and already we've faced so many problems," Dhruv spoke hesitatingly.

Chirag instantly chided him, "Shut up, yaar Dhruv. Don't try to convince us that this incident was a supernatural event." Jerking his head, he added, "Don't ever expect us to believe in your spooky theories, eh."

Dhruv tried another angle. "No . . . I'm not saying that. But consider this —when we had finalized the rent deal, we thought it was our windfall. A fully furnished three-bedroom independent house for just fifteen thousand rupees a month? Why such a fantastic deal? There must be a reason . . ."

Irritated, Chirag said, "So? What's the big deal? And there have been only some minor glitches since last week. Faulty wiring—"

"Not minor glitches, Chirag—and not normal at all," Dhruv stressed.

None of them were stating what their landlord had warned them against. "Please let the furniture remain where it is. Don't even think of shifting anything from its original place," he had warned.

"Why, Sir?" Chirag had asked. "Why should it be a problem for you?"

"Not a problem for me," Mr. Vohra had conveyed rather too grimly.

"Then? For whom?" Dhruv had probed.

"Just do not shift the furniture, okay! That's all I'm requesting."

The men had frowned at the strange request. And then one Sunday they had decided to change the sitting room set-up. The idea struck when they were watching TV after lunch. Aakash had voiced vehemently, "What a senseless place to keep the TV—in front of the window. The light from the window is shining in my eyes."

"*Haan* yaar, you're right. I was wondering what was troubling my eyes," Dhruv had voiced and instantly jumped up to shift the TV.

Chirag had tried to stop them, "Wait, boys. Mr. Vohra warned us against shifting the furniture. Remember he said that if we took a chair out to sit in the sun, we were to place it back at exactly the same place before dark."

"That's funny. Anyway, we'll shift it back when we leave the house, if we ever do. Though, what's his problem if we rearrange the furniture to our liking?"

"Mr. Vohra is a nutty old man!" Aakash had said as he stood up to help

Dhruv move the furniture.

"Let's at least ask him the reason . . ." Chirag had insisted but Dhruv and Aakash were already taking the TV towards the opposite wall. The sofa was kept in its place. Eventually they had to redo the whole set-up, by the end of which they stood smiling.

"See, what a difference it has made," Aakash had beamed. "The room looks more spacious and attractive."

And their nightmare began hereafter. Gradually. Chillingly.

That night all three of them heard bizarre voices coming from the sitting room. Someone's shuffling feet, strange whispers . . . They didn't think much of it. Next day being a working day, they were too busy to check which of them was walking around in the sitting room at that odd hour of the night. It was only in the evening that the topic arose. At the dinner table Chirag had posed, "Aakash, Dhruv, which one of you was restless last night, eh?"

"It must have been Dhruv, walking in the sitting room in the middle of the night. Were you unwell? And who were to speaking to? With yourself?"

"Speaking on phone with his girlfriend. I knew it, ha ha," Chirag had regarded Dhruv with raised eyebrows and a mischievous smile.

"No!" Dhruv had glowered at them. "I thought you both had gone to the sitting room to discuss something. I was in my bed the whole night."

The three of them stared at each other, speechless. Then who had been in the sitting room? All of them had heard strange voices. "Maybe there was someone outside," Chirag had said, trying to ease his friends' anxiousness.

"Outside, in the garden?"

"Was someone trying to break into our house at midnight?"

"In that case they must have left some clues."

They had rushed to get their torches, switched on the garden light and went out to probe, like a team of crime investigators. They had found nothing.

From the next day all electrical gadgets began to rebel. Morning—the kettle wouldn't heat, the cell phones wouldn't charge; dinnertime—the lights would start flickering; after dinner—the TV would stop working right at the moment of an important movie scene or in the middle of their favourite TV show. Sometimes there would be no electrical current exclusively in their house while the whole neighbourhood would be lighted. They would then find many mains switched off. Who was the mischief-maker? They had no clue.

An hour later on that Saturday, the electrician came. One by one he checked all the electrical connections—the mains, the meter, the wiring, the individual plug points. After about an hour he declared, "There's nothing

wrong with even a single connection. No wiring is loose. I have checked it all. All points are working fine. I fail to understand why you are facing problems." And he presented his bill with a big grin, collected his payment, and left.

The men decided to spend the rest of the day out. They ate lunch at Big Chill, watched a movie at PVR, and returned home late in the evening. As Chirag unlocked the door and they all stepped in, a light in the sitting room began to flicker—on off, on off. "What's this, yaar? Which of you two left the light on? And the electrician was wrong. There's some loose connection." Chirag turned to confront his friends. But they were not paying him any attention. They were staring at the TV set, as if they were watching a horror movie. The TV was on. They had switched it off last night. Who switched it on? Who had been inside the house in their absence? Burglars? Were they still inside?

Huddled together, they inspected the whole house, room by room. There was nothing amiss. Finally, they returned to the sitting room, switched off the TV set, and sat on the sofa.

"Nobody went near the TV, except of course the electrician. I wonder if he knows much about electrical work," Chirag grumbled and leaned against the cushion. "And why are you two quaking in your boots?"

"We aren't," Dhruv protested, wiping his face with his kerchief. "How can the loose wiring make the TV work? Please explain."

"True," Aakash nodded with a frown. "You need the remote to start the TV, don't you?"

"So you think a ghost lives here, and watches TV while we're out? Nonsense." Chirag got up in a huff and moved towards the kitchen. "I'm making masala cheese omelette for myself. Are you two interested?" Both Aakash and Dhruv exchanged glances and then quickly followed him.

It was a tiring day so they directly went to their bedrooms after dinner.

Dhruv fell into a deep dreamless sleep the moment his head hit the pillow. Sometime during midnight, he woke up with a start. Had he been dreaming? Someone had called out his name. He was sure he'd heard a voice. A deep male voice. Then somebody had sat on his bed with a thump and spoken, "Why are you sleeping in my bed? I am tired. I too need to rest."

Dhruv was wide awake now, peering into the semi darkness. There was no visible entity around. His hand dashed for the lamp's switch. Its bright light filled the room. Dhruv looked around, inspecting the room. Vacant walls stared back at him. What did he expect? It was a dream. Then his eyes went to the place where he had felt the thump. There was a well-defined depression on his quilt. Slowly he reached out his hand to touch the spot. It felt much

colder than the surrounding area. He checked the time. It was a little after two. *Now my dreams too are getting weird* . He shrugged and switched off the light. But it took him a while to fall asleep again.

"Were you wrestling at night? You look so tired," Aakash asked the moment Dhruv entered the kitchen with his red, swollen eyes and dishevelled hair. His two friends were ready and already eating breakfast.

"No, yaar, but had a weird dream at night, like someone was in my room. Couldn't sleep well." He shook his head and then sat down to narrate his experience.

Aakash blew out a whistle loudly. "That's very strange."

Chirag scoffed, "What's wrong with you two? It was just a dream, okay. Nothing spooky." He took a big sip of his coffee. "We're leaving early, Dhruv. Got a client call. Check all the switches before you go. I don't want to come back to the house with lights flickering."

"Oh, you two are leaving early?" Dhruv asked, and without waiting for a response, dashed to his room. Before others could finish their breakfast, he was back, all dressed up.

"You didn't shave, didn't even take a shower, Dhruv. Don't be a dirty goose."

"I had forgotten I too have an early meeting." His friends knew he was lying.

That evening Dhruv reached home much before the others, around six, but he couldn't gather courage to be alone in the house. He went to the nearby market to drink coffee and to while away his time. He pointlessly shopped for groceries. When he returned after an hour loaded with stuff, his housemates still hadn't returned. The house was pitch dark. He stood outside the gate, weighing pros and cons whether to open the door and enter the house alone. Suddenly the light of the sitting room began to flicker. In a momentary flash he clearly saw it—a man at the window, staring at him. Then it was gone like a dying flare. Dhruv shuddered. This wasn't a dream. He had unmistakably seen someone. Was someone inside? Had someone broken into the house? Or was it a ghost—something he had been suspecting all along?

They needed to vacate this house. It was getting dangerous here. But his friends were just not ready to believe him. It was annoying. *I'm not going to tell them anything about today's incident. They are anyway going to mock me, especially Chirag the logician* . He shifted further away from the house and waited for his housemates.

When Aakash and Chirag returned at eight, Dhruv was still posted outside. "Dhruv, why are you waiting for us here, like a baby waiting for Mom to

come?" Chirag taunted him. Aakash laughed gleefully and opened the door. Dhruv followed them inside.

After a quick change, they made sandwiches, opened beer bottles, and went to the sitting room. "It's warm in here, and stuffy," Aakash commented and opened a window. They decided to watch a movie from Chirag's downloads. After much argument they decided on a sci-fi film *Starship Troopers*
.

It was a battle scene where troopers were fighting strange bugs. The bluish night light from the screen filled the room with the same eerie hue. Aakash turned to pick his beer from the side table when his attention was drawn towards the open window. There was something hovering there—a black something, a shadow that was twitching, pulsating. Then slowly it entered the room and began moving towards him. He watched it approaching, horrified. "Guys, do you see this thing? What's it?" he whispered, trying to ward it off with his hands.

"What thing?" Chirag annoyingly turned towards him. The shadow suddenly changed its course and sped towards the TV. Aakash's eyes followed it. It hit the framed photograph sitting on the TV. The glass exploded into pieces. The photo along with the frame went flying, just inches away from Chirag's head, and hit the wall before falling on the floor. All looked at each other, aghast. They had clicked this photo of the three of them together on their trip to Goa last year.

"Did you notice?" Dhruv murmured. "The glass broke first. How is that possible?"

"And then the frame went flying as if it was tossed by someone," Aakash added cautiously. His eyes expanded in fear.

Chirag remained tight-lipped. He knew he had had a lucky escape. He switched off the TV. After a few minutes of stunned silence, he smiled and nodded. "I know what happened. It was because of the energy being emitted by the TV."

"Then things should keep tossing around every day in every house where there's a TV." Dhruv rolled his eyes.

"You missed the main thing, Chirag—a dark shadow came drifting from outside, through the open window. I saw it entering, and then also saw it hit the frame. I don't know what's going on in this house," Aakash said, wringing his hands.

"Nothing is going on. Don't make a mountain out of a molehill," Chirag chided him, shaking his head exasperatingly. "I am sleepy now. Had a long day. You guys watch the movie. I'm going to bed." He stomped out in a huff. Aakash and Dhruv looked at each other. They daren't switch on the TV.

"We need to clean the mess," Dhruv finally muttered. Aakash nodded and picked up the leftover frame with the picture and placed it on the table. Together they went to fetch a broom to collect shards of the broken glass.

It had been a cloudy day and now it began to rain outside. The blowing wind brought bursts of spray in through the window. Dhruv shut the window and then both of them retired to their respective rooms for the night.

Chirag hadn't been able to sleep well. The sceptic was irritated by the farfetched claims of his two friends. *Ghosts in the house? Really? How can educated young men think and behave like some illiterate maids? They are my friends, nevertheless . . . There is a scientific explanation to all these presumably unexplained energies. It can be possible with so many gadgets in the house—they emit powerful electronic waves, and that's what triggered the incident.* These thoughts invaded his logical mind till he fell into a fitful sleep.

It was midnight when he got out of bed to go to the bathroom. With his eyelids drooping and his back slumped in sleepiness, he used the toilet and then with equal sluggishness moved to the washbasin to wash his hands. As he extended his hand towards the towel, he involuntarily glanced into the mirror. There was someone strange standing right behind him, someone with a burnt and distorted face. Gooey stuff was oozing out of his cheeks and chin, and dripping down. Half his lips were missing and his teeth were exposed in a menacing grin. His reddish eyes were glaring at him angrily. In an instant Chirag's eyes flew wide open. His heartbeat stopped and he became paralysed with shock. He gagged as his scream got stuck in his throat. The ghastly reflection moved closer. Chirag retched and broke into cold sweat. Then the image slowly faded. Chirag stood rooted to the floor. *What was that?* He couldn't muster the courage to turn. He stared into the mirror and blinked his eyes a number of times. It reflected only his image now. Was he awake? Had he just had a nightmare? His mind was still debating when a hand appeared behind him—a skeletal hand, reddish brown and scalded, burnt like the face he had just seen. He knew it wasn't a nightmare; it was happening. There was someone eerie behind him. The creepy hand now moved towards his neck, the extended charred fingers seemed to enclose around it. A burning sensation on his neck was as clear as the whooshing wind outside. Chirag now found his voice and screamed.

Both Aakash and Dhruv heard the scream and jumped out of their beds. They rushed towards Chirag's room. The room was plunged in darkness. Aakash switched on the light. Chirag's bed was vacant. They noted light seeping through a slit in the bathroom door. They rushed to open the door, which fortunately wasn't bolted from inside. They found Chirag sitting on the

floor of the bathroom. He was ghostly pale and his entire body was shuddering. His teeth chattered as he tried to say something. He could barely speak.

His friends helped him up and brought him to the bedroom. Aakash ran to fetch a glass of water. He switched on the kitchen light. With a loud spark the whole house plunged into darkness. He hurried back and found Dhruv and Chirag rushing out of the room. "There's someone there, in Chirag's room," Dhruv whispered. "We both just heard it—a growling voice clearly saying 'Get out.'"

There was a thunderstorm raging outside. The rain was pouring down in torrents. It was impossible to step out in such a downpour. All three hurried into Aakash's room, for a street lamp directly outside the window rescued his room from complete darkness. Aakash shut the door and switched on his eight-battery torch.

His friends' presence helped Chirag to muster enough courage to narrate what he had encountered. His speech wasn't normal yet; there was tremor in it. Keeping his voice as low as possible, for he was afraid someone else was listening too, he told them about the strange apparition he had seen in the mirror. "And as I screamed, the hand faded before my eyes, just like the face."

Aakash held Chirag's shaking hand in his to support him, but all three were petrified. If Chirag, the fearless theorist, could be so terribly frightened, it was a highly alarming situation. Were their lives in danger? "Sorry, yaar, I never believed you both. I never believed in ghosts. But this house is indeed haunted. There's a ghost, or ghosts in here," he concluded.

Barely had he finished his narrative that they began hearing rustling sounds originating from Dhruv's room next door. The sound slowly moved on to the sitting room. They didn't dare to open the door to check, so terrified they were. All three spent the rest of the night clustered together and praying. The scrapings continued unabated.

The sound stopped only at the crack of dawn. The men refused to leave their relatively safe sanctuary yet. The foreboding silence was frightening. They had no idea what awaited them outside this room. They could muster courage to come out of the room only in the comforting bright light of the sun, much past the time they usually left for office.

All the bedrooms led to the sitting room. That's where they emerged, slowly, bunched together—and then stood aghast. The wallpaper in the sitting room was in tatters. Behind it, blackened walls gaped at them. They could also partly see the wall in Dhruv's room—in the same condition.

"Okay, friends, it's time to call the landlord to demand an explanation," Aakash declared in a hushed tone as they sat in the kitchen munching toasts,

their meagre breakfast. None of them had either the energy or the drive to go to office. Also, they needed to surf the net to find another accommodation.

Chirag punched Mr. Vohra's number on his cell phone and put his phone on the speaker mode. "Mr. Vohra, something is not right with this house. We need to see you urgently."

"Sorry, I am busy. Can't come today."

Aakash added sternly, "Mr. Vohra, you haven't visited the house even once. Even to sign the rent agreement and hand over the key to us, you invited us to your house. Why don't you ever come here?"

"That's right! There must be a particular reason, Mr. Vohra," Dhruv stated crossly.

"No, no, there's no reason. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go somewhere."

"Look, Mr. Vohra, either you come to see us here immediately, or we are coming to your house with the police. We'll also file a court case against you for hiding facts from us."

"No, no. There's no need to involve the police." After some hesitation Mr. Vohra said, "Okay. I'll see you now, but only for ten minutes."

"That's fine." And Chirag disconnected the phone. He turned towards his friends. "Mr. Vohra is clearly hesitant to come here. Why? There's something fishy in the whole affair."

Half an hour later, the bell rang and Dhruv ushered in Mr. Vohra, the landlord. He entered sheepishly, looking around in every direction and stopped dead as soon as he saw the tattered wallpaper. He sucked in his breath and stood stunned.

He was led to the kitchen, the place comparatively clean.

"Mr. Vohra, we are leaving the house today. Till we find a new accommodation we'll stay in a guesthouse, but not here, not a day more," Chirag declared.

Mr. Vohra was speechless. The expression on his face was a mix of fear and helplessness. He opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but then hesitated and looked down. Chirag sighed audibly. He went and plugged the kettle to make tea for everyone and then came to sit next to Mr. Vohra. The others joined in.

"But before that, we need an explanation. Who are these people, the ghosts, haunting this house? And why?" Dhruv asked.

Mr. Vohra sighed, shook his head and wiped his brow. "It seems to be haunted by the spirits that didn't get their salvation."

"But why didn't they?"

"There had been a tragedy here."

"What tragedy?" Aakash asked.

"The couple that owned the house had been burnt alive in a fire."

"Oh! How?"

"Perhaps there was a short circuit in the bedroom's air conditioner, and the curtains caught fire."

"How was it that the couple continued to sleep through it? Why didn't they rush out to save themselves?" Dhruv probed.

Mr. Vohra was quiet for a few seconds. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Actually, there was a party in their house that evening. The man and his wife had consumed a good amount of alcohol and most likely they continued to sleep like logs. The fire spread quickly. Before they realized and could rush out, it was too late. Both of them were charred to death."

"How do you know about the party?" Chirag looked at Mr. Vohra with narrowed eyes.

"Well . . . Actually I was there. I saw them drinking a lot."

"So you knew the couple?" Aakash asked.

"They were my distant relatives." Mr. Vohra lowered his eyes.

Is he telling the truth? Chirag wondered and shrugged. "Terrible," he said, shaking his head. "That explains the frightening face I saw in the mirror. Now I realize, it was a face that was charred in a fire." Aakash drew in his breath and Dhruv shut his eyes tightly and shuddered as if he could envisage the scene.

Mr. Vohra looked up at Chirag in alarm. "Nobody claimed to have seen a face before. You are the first one."

"I am the first in many things," Chirag spoke annoyingly. "By the way, then how did you become the owner of this house?"

"I bought this house for renting purposes," Mr. Vohra replied in a subdued tone. "I wouldn't have if I had known I would face such immense problems. The price offered for this prime property was too good to refuse. I spent a lot of money on its repairs. And you are the sixth tenant in two years relinquishing the rent deal. Though you stayed for the maximum period, of one month. Others couldn't stay here for more than a week." He shook his head dejectedly. "I don't know what to do with this albatross hanging around my neck." He sat with his head bowed and hands limp on his lap. He made a pitiable figure.

"Mr. Vohra, you should have at least warned us." Although Dhruv was annoyed, he couldn't speak harshly.

"I warned you in a way. The ghosts residing here do not like the furniture moved. Don't ask me why, for I have no clue. But none of my tenants, including you, took my words seriously. The problem starts after the furniture

is moved from the original place. And I have noted that you have made changes in the sitting room."

"You should have told us this specifically at the time of signing the agreement."

"Would you have taken the house then? Moreover, I thought you were young, and fearless and perhaps things wouldn't be so bad."

"Young or old, who wouldn't be afraid of ghosts?" Chirag remarked. Dhruv and Aakash exchanged glances.

"What about the walls? Why cover them with wallpaper and not get them painted?" Aakash posed.

"Do you think I didn't try? I got this house painted eleven times, mind you, eleven times, especially that one bedroom that belonged to the couple, and the sitting room. But each time within days the paint disappeared. There was no other way to conceal the charred black walls."

"Oh!"

Mr. Vohra tightly shut his eyes and shook his head in utter helplessness. "The wallpaper was the last resort. Even this hasn't been successful in hiding the spooky walls."

"What's happening?" Suddenly Aakash's agitated voice drew everyone's attention. The three men stared in horror at Mr. Vohra. His hands were covered in black soot. Mr. Vohra squealed and reached for a napkin lying on the table to wipe clean his hands. But before he could do that, whorls of black dust rose from the walls and began to fall on him. He jumped and tried dusting it off his clothes. It was a futile effort. Squirts of black dust now fell directly on his face. He screamed in terror and ran towards the exit door. "Liar . . . Murderer . . ." His three tenants clearly heard a spooky ghostly voice rise from the walls as they rushed out of the house following the owner. There was a whooshing sound of water boiling in the kettle, and then a loud blast trailed them.

THE LODGE

Ankur and Mohit reached the bus stop at Mandi House in the heart of New Delhi well before time. Dumping their rucksacks on the ground, they sat on a roadside parapet to wait for the bus. "Ankur, I am so excited. Never been to the mountains. My first time, yaar!" Mohit rubbed his hands in excitement.

"Don't tell me!" Ankur was genuinely surprised.

Ankur was two years younger than Mohit, taller and much stronger, with an imposing personality. Partly it was the genetics and partly his regular workouts at the gym. Mohit was short, somewhat overweight, non-sports type. They were colleagues working in a multinational company. It was there, at their workplace, that they had struck a good friendship. They both had a few common interests, outdoor activities being one of them.

Mohit rolled his eyes. "Yep, that's right! You see, during the school and college, I used to tag along with my parents to spend all my holidays with my two sets of grandparents, in Kanpur and in Lucknow—nothing close to the mountains."

"You got married two years ago, didn't you? You should've gone to the mountains for your honeymoon. The hills are so quiet and dreamy. Perfect for romance."

"We went to Bangkok and Pattaya, yaar. Ocean and beaches. My wife Ruhi chose the destination." He sniggered. "And there is even less chance for me to go visiting the mountains now. Ruhi is from Allahabad, you know. So now I have to take regular pilgrimages to Allahabad too, for whatever leaves I manage. Visiting the mountains has become a remote possibility. That's why I jumped at your suggestion, to take this trip." He shook his head as if he had missed a great deal in life. "Also, I badly needed a change, yaar, some respite from the regular doze of nagging at home." He thumped Ankur's back, chuckling gleefully. "You are lucky, still a bachelor, eh!"

Ankur smiled and lifted his hands. "I'm in no hurry to marry for at least another five years. Still a lot of world to explore!"

"True, yaar. Once you're married, you get tied. Not that I mind being married, especially when the babies arrive." There was tenderness in Mohit's smile. "I adore my little baby, my one-year-old Sheena. She's a darling." The smile was quickly replaced by a frown. "But sometimes a man needs a respite."

"Hmm. Once you see the Himalayan mountains, you'll know what you have been missing in life." Ankur took out his pullover from his bag and slipped into it. "Wear something warm, Mohit. I don't want you falling sick even before reaching our destination." Winter had begun to make its presence felt in Delhi in early November. Since mountains would be much colder, Ankur had made Mohit buy a fleece jacket, warm inner wear, woollen scarf, and even a pair of gloves. "And it's going to be really cold there. I checked. The maximum temperature is below fifteen degrees these days."

"Do you think it'll snow there?" Mohit asked animatedly.

Ankur laughed at his childlike excitement. For him the mountains were charming but nothing novel. He had been going to the hill stations ever since he was a child and loved them immensely. His mother belonged to the hills. He had travelled to so many since his childhood that now he yearned to explore new hidden corners, alien spots, places so remote where he could map his own trails.

While surfing online, Ankur had chanced upon a website of a small resort in a remote valley, called Dhanter Valley, about five kilometres off Kullu Manikaran road. There were only a few scattered villages in the area. About a kilometre upcountry from the last village, someone had built a small resort of four bedrooms. The place was at the bank of a pristine spring that originated from the glaciers. The snow-capped peaks surrounded the verdant valley. This treat to the eyes was hidden to most tourists— promised the website and the supplementing pictures. Perfect! That's what Ankur had been looking for. He hated crowded places. He had immediately booked a room and made advance payment through his credit card.

They were now catching a night bus to Kullu, and hoped to reach there by ten in the morning.

The night journey by the Volvo bus wasn't too bad. Both of them managed to get some sleep. After a sumptuous breakfast at Kullu, they made inquiries and then caught a bus going towards Dhanter Valley. The bus driver apprised them with a big grin, "I know where to drop you. After that, you'll have to cover about four kilometres on foot. Only a *kacchi pakdandi* goes down to the village."

After about an hour's journey the driver stopped the bus and gestured at Ankur and Mohit. "You see that path? It leads to the valley nestling between the two high mountain ranges, the Dhanter valley. It's about an hour's walk from here. Best of luck."

The boys got off and the driver drove away, leaving them standing at the point where no habitation was visible for as far as eyes could see. Mohit looked around uneasily. The desolation was seemingly making him nervous. "Ankur, there is nothing here but a dense forest. Yaar, I hope the driver didn't make a mistake."

Ankur laughed. For him this was nothing new. Many regions in Himachal were deserted and remote. "Come on, scaredy cat. Follow me." He confidently stepped on the footpath the driver had pointed, and began walking down in big strides. Mohit hesitated and then followed him. Given a choice, he would have taken a bus right back to the town. Deserted places triggered his panic button.

They walked silently for about five minutes. Mohit kept looking cautiously in all directions, also time and again turning to inspect the path left behind. "Do you think there are wild animals in this forest?" he asked gingerly.

"Come on, Mohit! If the wild animals weren't in the forest where else would they be? Eh? In pubs, drinking beer?" He laughed loudly at his own comment. The sound echoed through the valley. Mohit stopped dead in his tracks, shocked and awed at the same time.

"Welcome to the mountains, Mohit. Come on, try saying something in a loud voice."

"What was that?"

"Echo, silly! Go ahead. Shout. And then hear the echo of your voice."

"No, yaar. It's scary."

"Mohit, grow up. How are you going to teach your daughter to be strong? You are scared of even your own echo, eh?"

"It's indeed scary. Seems like some giant hidden in the mountains is imitating you."

Ankur shook his head and continued walking silently. After they had covered another five minutes' distance Mohit spoke again. "Ankur, have you read Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* ?" Ankur smiled and nodded. He knew what was going on in Mohit's head and had begun to realize how spineless he was. He should have brought along some braveheart and not this craven.

"You know, we should have brought along a guide or someone who knows these areas. We might get lost in the forest, never to be found again."

Ankur was now irritated. "Don't think of morbid things, Mohit. It will do

you good to adopt a positive attitude. Look around. Have you ever seen such virgin beauty?"

"Yeah, the mountains are very beautiful. But, still . . . What if we get lost? We don't even have much food with us."

"There'll be fruits and berries in the forest," Ankur voiced exasperatingly and decided not to indulge in more conversation with the sissy, and spoil his trip. He increased his speed. Mohit had to run behind him to keep up the pace. He was soon breathless. "Let's rest, Ankur. Please. My feet are hurting. So are my lungs. You're going too fast."

Ankur halted for Mohit to regain his breath. "Look, Mohit, can you see that village down in the valley, surrounded by fruit trees? The resort is fifteen minutes' walk from there. We can halt at the village for a cup of tea, if you want."

"Oh, yeah," Mohit seemed relieved. The sight of the village and lure of a hot cup of tea silenced him. He happily followed Ankur without further grumblings.

The village was a hidden hamlet of ten scattered houses. Only a handful of men were visible, working in their terraced fields. Mohit's full attention was focused on finding a tea shop, which they couldn't locate. They came across an old man, well into his eighties —shrivelled, wrinkled, and well-baked in the mountain sun—who sat on a bamboo mat sunning his aged body and coughing on and off. "Baba, is there a tea shop here? We badly need a cup of tea."

"It's good to see you, Sahibs, in our isolated village. My daughter-in-law will make you tea. You may call it her tea shop, but then we seldom have visitors in this far-flung place. What brings you here?" he spoke through his happy smile and wheezing.

"To enjoy this peace and fresh air, Baba. We get fed up of the noise and pollution of the big city. It feels so refreshing here." Ankur plunked his rucksack on the ground and smiled at him courteously. The old man hollered and a young, fair, and attractive lady brought out two red plastic chairs for them to sit. "Will you have something to eat too? I can make hot pakoras," she asked graciously.

Mohit nodded eagerly but Ankur overruled his temptation. "Thank you, Miss. I think our lunch is ready at the place of our stay. Pakoras are tempting but will kill our appetite. We'll come later for the treat, maybe tomorrow. For now, just tea, please." The woman nodded and rushed in. "So, Baba, how long have you been living here?"

The old man smiled. "Most of my life. Lived in Kullu for a few years

where I worked in a hotel, but missed home. So I came back, worked on the farms till I could. Now I let the youngsters take care of the fields, and I pray. Waiting for the final call from above." He gave Ankur a warm, toothless grin and raised his dried skeletal hands in veneration to the life's final caller.

"I can understand your attachment to the place. Who would want to leave this beauty? We are going to spend a few days in the Jungle Lodge, and relish the splendour of these mountains."

"Oh! You're staying in the Jungle Lodge? I thought you were staying in Kullu and were just day visitors here." The old man became quiet hereafter, and sat with his head bent.

"This is a beautiful expanse. Many visitors must come here, especially in summers?" Ankur asked.

"Hardly any, only once in a while." The old man sighed sadly. "And I suggest—" The lady brought them tea and he broke off. She had brought three cups of tea. The old man took his cup and nodded at her. "Bless you, Beti, for looking after this old man so well." He looked at Ankur and Mohit, "After my Dhanno left this earthly abode, she has never let me feel helpless. She's the finest girl we could find for my Kishan." The lady acknowledged the compliment with a smile and went inside her house. The men enjoyed the well-made spiced beverage in silence for a few minutes. The old man slurped tea in large gulps. Ankur looked at him and wondered why he looked withdrawn all of a sudden. "Baba, why aren't there many visitors here? I mean there is this lodge, right in the middle of a pristine Himalayan forest, at the bank of a pure mountain stream. Isn't it? Then why is this place not popular?"

The old man's frown deepened further. It was quite apparent he was hesitating. "I am not an authority to speak about this," he said rather curtly and continued sipping his tea. There was a strange look on his face now. Ankur could see his vacillation, as if he was weighing the choice between speaking or remaining silent. By now the boys had finished their tea. Mohit went to the door to make the payment. The old man put his cup down in a haste and spoke abruptly, "You know, my son works there, in the lodge, as a cook. Good salary. Gets his monthly pay and money to run the kitchen, through a cheque. He has a bank account in Kullu. The Sahib lives in the planes, in Punjab. Hardly comes there now. My son too—he never stays the night in the lodge. He and Shyam. Money is good, and keeps them bound to the job. But they always return to the village well before dark. It's very lonely there and, and—"

"Come on, Ankur, let's head to our destination. I need a hot shower and then some lunch. My stomach is demanding food," Mohit said, interrupting their talk.

"You have a deep gorge in place of a stomach." Ankur chuckled. The cup of tea had renewed their energy. They both picked up their rucksacks and headed off towards their destination. "Be careful, young Sahibs," the old man called out. "And pray. Don't forget to pray to Paramatma, the ultimate protector!"

The urgency in the old man's voice was disturbing. Ankur turned and nodded to him. The old man's gaze through his narrowed eyes was piercing. Had Ankur just seen pity in them or was it fear? Whatever it was, he felt disconcerted. Then throwing the passing thought out of his mind, he walked away. Around the curve he once again looked back at the old man. He now sat with his eyes closed, mumbling mutely. He was obviously praying. The young lady was standing at the door, staring at their receding backs with a strange expression on her face, a mixture of sympathy and anxiety. Her lips were pressed tight, as if to keep the words she wanted to speak from escaping. Ankur had a weird feeling but then the moment they were out of his sight, he tossed his unrest out of his mind. *I have come here to enjoy the peace and beauty, and beauty in peace. Anxiety is a killer.* He nodded to himself.

The forest was much denser now and the path narrower. They steadily climbed up. The cool dappled sunlight drizzled on them through the tall conifers. It was extremely quiet here. Uncannily silent. Ankur realized with some trepidation that even the chirping of birds had become quelled. *At this time of the day? Where are the birds?* Instead of enjoying the calm, Ankur was becoming more and more troubled as they neared the lodge. Something was not right. They were surrounded by natural beauty, yet his heart felt heavy, as if its muscles had stiffened and were making an effort to pump blood to the rest of his body. He sensed his joy, his youthful energy, slowly dissipating, making him sad and glum. It was peculiar. He had never felt like this before. He turned to look at Mohit. He was about five metres behind him, carelessly striding on without a care in the world. *Why is it that only I am feeling depressed? A premonition?* His heavy steps were urging him to stop. A distant voice from the deep recesses of his brain was ringing a vague warning bell. He stopped to let Mohit catch up with him. "Yaar, this is really a beautiful place. I am already in love with it. Thank you for bringing me here." He grinned and Ankur felt a strange fear, as if somebody was mocking at his helplessness. Why was he feeling so? Why was he going nuts?

After about twenty minutes of an uphill walk, they reached a broad flat area. A small manmade structure was partly visible through the trees. It was a single storeyed unobtrusive stone and wood structure right in the middle of a clump of pine trees, the only house in the intense wilderness. They opened

the small rickety gate on which hung a small board with 'Jungle Lodge' written in bold letters. The freshly painted board was in sheer contrast to the rest of the old structure, like a molester luring the victim with a sweet talk. Ankur halted to regard the place. A narrow pathway, lined by an unkempt garden led to the old Victorian style cottage. A series of windows on either side of a heavy carved door formed the front facade. A two metres wide veranda extended through the entire length. The slanting rays of the late noon sun now fell on the veranda, spreading its golden glow.

There was no furniture in the veranda, no chairs to sit, even though it was a perfect place to bask in the sun. Then Ankur spotted a rocking chair, weather-beaten but sturdy, in the far corner, under the shadow of an ancient oak tree. It vacillated mildly, giving Ankur some serious creeps. *It's the wind* , he reminded himself.

"These British were so resourceful, yaar. Imagine finding such remote corners to build cottages!" Mohit remarked with a grin, drawing Ankur's attention. *Why is he grinning so strangely, like an orangutan?* All of a sudden everything felt strange to Ankur, even Mohit's grin appeared vile.

He could hear the splashing sound of the running water from somewhere close by, though the brook was completely shielded by the trees. It too sounded unfriendly and sinister. Ankur shook his head to throw the dreadful feeling out. What was wrong with him today? He always loved the mountains, and its sprightly streams. Then why was it that everything appeared weird this time, and unnerving? Was some sixth sense working on him?

Two local men simply clad in kurta pyjama, rough woollen coats, and Kullu caps on their heads sat on the stairs leading to the front veranda. They were apparently waiting for them and now both stood up to greet their guests.

The short, dark man, well in his forties came forward. "I'm Shyam, Sir, the caretaker, and Kishan is the cook." He pointed at the tall, fair, good-looking young man standing next to him. "He'll cook you very good food, Sir. But you are a little late for lunch." Kishan smiled shyly. Yet, Ankur felt that the smile lacked warmth or candidness that most *paharis* are known for. Shyam's countenance remained serious, infelicitous, as if he worked here against his will. Ankur noted it all at a glance.

"No, no, we'll eat our lunch now. I'm *very* hungry after such a long walk," Mohit said.

Kishan immediately responded. "Lunch is ready, Sir, so is the dinner. I'll lay food as soon as you're ready to eat."

"I'm ready to eat now. Lunch only! Dinner later, at night! Where is the dining room?" Mohit looked around.

"Wash first, you monkey," Ankur guffawed. "Kishan, please lay the food while we wash, in five minutes. And can you lay it here, in the veranda? We'll eat in the pleasant warmth of the mountain sun." Ankur was desperately trying to expel the despondence from his system. Perhaps the old man at the village had something to do with it—he had set his mood sliding down through his strange behaviour. *Maybe the age has turned him senile. I shouldn't give him much thought.*

"Bring that rocking chair here, in the sun. I will sit on it," Mohit ordered.

Shyam and Kishan suddenly stiffened and then exchanged glances. "Sir, we have instructions never ever to shift that chair from its place. And, and Sir, for some reason nobody is supposed to use it. We request you the same, please. Don't sit on it."

"That's a strange request. What's wrong with the chair?" Mohit eyed the chair and made a face. "It won't break if I sit on it."

"Why is it so? Why can't people sit on it?" Ankur asked with a sinking heart.

"We can't say for sure, Sir. But it's not good to use that chair. I'll bring you other chairs and serve you food here." Shyam gestured at Kishan who rushed in earnestness towards the west corner of the lodge, apparently the kitchen. Shyam showed them to their room—a medium-sized old-fashioned room with wood-panelled walls. The wood was chipping from various places and the crude paint was coming off. It was far from well-maintained rooms that Ankur was used to. It contained bare minimum furniture. A round table and a small two-seater sofa in dull grey upholstery separated the two single beds. Two old-fashioned straight-backed wicker chairs rested against a wall. Mohit dumped his bag on the bed next to the wall, thus laying claim on it. This corner looked attractive as the sunlight seeped through the small window and directly fell on the bed.

As the men returned to the veranda, two dining chairs and a small round table had been placed there, along with the plates and the cutlery. Kishan rushed out with a food tray and hurriedly served them. "What's the urgency, chap?" Ankur asked in good humour. "We're in no rush. We're going to relax here for the next three days." Very clearly he noted Kishan and Shyam exchange glances. What did they mean by it? The dreadful feeling returned. *Something isn't right here* .

Mohit was too busy stuffing his mouth. "Yummy. Well done, Kishan," he spoke through his mouth full.

Ankur ate a little of each dish. Chicken curry, chickpeas in yoghurt sauce, fried eggplants, mixed vegetables raita. Food was indeed delicious. Shyam stood behind Mohit, supervising Kishan and fetching them hot rotis. "How

old is this lodge, Shyam?" Ankur asked.

"Very old, Sahib—older than my age. Our sahib renovated the original lodge which was made by an angrez sahib before independence."

"The angrez sahib then sold his house to your sahib before leaving our country, right?"

"No, our sahib bought it in a government auction. The angrez sahib, it is rumoured, died one evening while bathing in the stream. He had no heir."

"Oh!"

"And Sahib, please don't go near the stream. Though there's not enough water in it, there have been many accidents. It's strange. Last year also—" he then broke off. Ankur caught Kishan gesturing at him to remain quiet. But why? What was the harm in warning them? What were they trying to hide?

"What happened last year? Did somebody die here?" Ankur asked, determined to get the full story. Even Mohit's attention was diverted from his food. He looked at Shyam with raised eyebrows.

"Should I get you more hot rotis?" Kishan tried swaying them away from the conversation.

"No, thank you. We're done. Food was really good." Ankur smiled at him despite the uneasy feeling that was gnawing at him, increasing by the minute.

"I'm going for a little nap. Didn't sleep well last night," Mohit stretched his arms and yawned.

"Only a short nap, Mohit. We've come here to explore. Let's go for a walk into the forest after a little rest."

"Sahib, we serve very early dinner, at six. You'll have to be back before that," Kishan spoke in earnestness.

"Six? Too early! We are used to a late dinner, not before eight. Moreover, we have just eaten a big meal!"

"In that case, we'll keep your food in a hot case on the table, ready to eat. We live in the village, Sahib. Our duty ends at six," Kishan spoke obdurately.

"We weren't told about it. We expect you both to stay here. We might need you any time," Ankur protested.

"Yes, yes. What do you mean you'll go away? What about the other guests? Aren't other rooms occupied?"

"No, Sahib, you're the only guests of this season. And it is an understanding with our Sahib that we'll stay here only till six," Shyam insisted.

"Where does your Sahib live? We need to speak with him about it."

"He lives in Punjab, Sahib."

"I've his number in my phone. I must call him. This is nonsense!" Ankur took out his cell phone from the pocket.

"You can try but the connection is very bad here. I don't think you can

connect from here. You get better reception from the village."

"This is not funny! He runs his tourist lodge with hardly any staff. He thinks it's a joke, enticing people and then not providing proper service. We've paid a huge amount for our stay here."

"Our sahib is trying to sell this place. He doesn't want to run it after what happened last year and . . ." Ankur again noted Kishan giving Shyam a warning look.

"What happened last year?" Mohit asked with great interest.

Ankur intruded heatedly, "Then why doesn't he close up this place, hmm? Either give good service to people or don't run it."

"Because he's not getting any buyer. He's ready to sell it even at a loss," Shyam hurriedly concluded and then rushed to help Kishan clear the table. It was obvious that they were not interested in prolonging the conversation. In a moment they disappeared from the scene and took refuge in the kitchen.

"Strange place, eh, and strange people. It seems we chose the wrong place to spend our precious holidays. What a waste!" Ankur scoffed angrily and Mohit shrugged.

Half an hour later Ankur put the book he was reading down on the table. Mohit was deep asleep. He shook him up. "Get up, Mohit, sleepyhead. Let's explore the mountains." Mohit rubbed his eyes and left his bed reluctantly. Putting on their shoes, they came out. Shyam and Kishan were once again sitting on the stairs. They moved aside to let them pass. "Sahib, please come early and stay away from the stream," Shyam repeated his warning as Ankur closed the gate behind them.

Ankur discovered a narrow track, seemingly unused for a long time. It led into the forest. He hesitated and then rubbishing his strange unease, he led Mohit towards the path. The sun was near the western horizon, above a mountain peak, throwing its feeble dying light on it. The forest was soundless and serene. The crunching sound of their trekking boots crushing the dry leaves boomed like a bulldozer crushing gravel. The silence was so intense that they were afraid to talk lest they disturb it. After about ten minutes they reached a clearing at the bank of a gurgling stream. There were a few wooden logs strewn around, intentionally placed for resting. Someone had been using the spot for leisure, perhaps for fishing, though it seemed time had completely forgotten it. No one, not even cattle, seemed to be using this forlorn and forgotten spot anymore. Moss had overgrown on the wooden logs. Creepers had woven a dense network all over the ground.

Ankur spread his handkerchief on one of the logs, and sat on it. He decided not to go any further. It was really a beautiful forest. To explore more, they should be out early the next day, after their breakfast, get lunch

packed and go on a day-long trek.

The creek was enticing. Mohit directly dashed towards it. "Mohit, be careful. Remember, Shyam kept warning us against venturing into the stream."

"I think these paharis are scaredy-cats. There's hardly two feet deep water in it." Opening his shoes and socks, he dipped his feet in the water and then shrieked as the ice-cold water slammed against his warm feet. He hopped out gasping and laughing. He repeated his antics a number of times, prancing like a child. Ankur watched his frolics from his seat. He too wanted to join in the fun, but something had gone wrong with his mood today. He was feeling down in the dumps. He just sat sullenly and smiled weakly.

The sun was now only partly visible behind the peak. Deep crimson rays burst like a crown on the mountain's head. It was a stunning display and Ankur pointed it out to Mohit. He stopped monkeying around and stood still, mesmerized by the scene. Then the sun slowly dipped behind the mountain causing a sudden feeling of a loss that Ankur couldn't explain. A quick movement in the vicinity drew his attention. He watched with horror as Mohit went tumbling towards the creek. He was desperately trying to hold on to the tufts of grass at the edge of the creek, preventing his headlong fall into the stream. Ankur sucked in his breath. Before he could rush to help, Mohit managed to come out of the water. He was dripping and shivering.

"Ankur, what's wrong with you? Why did you push me? What if I was swept away by the stream, eh?" he voiced, furious, as he made an effort to squeeze out water from his clothes. "Are you trying to kill me?" Mohit glared at Ankur and realized that he was still sitting on the log, looking at him with a stumped expression. *Is he pretending? Did he push me and then rush back to sit on the log once again, so innocently? Can the action be completed so quickly? And why would he do that? Ankur is a mature man.* "Ankur, I'm talking to you. Are you listening?" Mohit was loud enough to disturb a clamour of rooks resting on a gigantic oak tree. They flew out cawing, flapped around angrily, their dark shadows obscuring the light falling on them.

"Why are you shouting, Mohit? Stop being a child, and stop playing near the creek. You almost fell into it! Even if you know swimming, it's not easy to swim out of a fast flowing stream."

"But, but I didn't lose my balance. I wasn't doing anything—I was watching the sun . . ." Mohit had a perplexed look on his face. "Didn't you, didn't you push me from behind—maybe playfully?"

"What crap? Am I an idiot? Why would I do that? It can be dangerous! Even a small child has that much sense." Ankur was momentarily angry, but then his expression changed. He looked tensed and worried. Getting up

slowly, he said, "Mohit, let's go back. It'll be dark very soon and I don't want to be stuck here in the dark, in this forlorn forest. I don't know why . . ." And without completing his sentence, without waiting to see whether Mohit was following him, he turned and hurried away towards the lodge. Mohit picked up his shoes and socks and ran behind him barefoot, water dripping down his jeans.

Typical of the mountains, the night began slinking in like a snake stalking its prey. Ankur's mettle too began fading with the waning light, and to his dismay an inexplicable fear crept into his heart. He had trekked remote Himalayan mountains, living in tents or simply sleeping out in the summer. How he had enjoyed the star-studded cobalt sky! The stars and planets appeared so near on the mountains as if one could clasp them by just extending one's hand.

He had never felt even a frisson of fear. Never.

What was wrong today? He rushed towards the lodge to find safety inside it with Mohit running behind to keep up with him.

The lodge was enveloped in darkness by the time they reached it. A naked forty watts bulb dimly lit a corner of the veranda. As they climbed up the stairs to reach the veranda, the men noted the rocking chair in a corner gently moving to and fro. It seemed someone had just vacated it. "Kishan . . . Shyam . . ." Ankur's voice echoed. Complete silence had enveloped the pale walls. Ankur called a number of times, louder and louder, but nobody responded to his calls.

"What the hell . . ." Mohit stood in the veranda and cursed. "Why aren't they replying?" He was now shivering like a tree in a hurricane. His wet feet and legs were getting numb.

"I don't know. There is no light, not even in the kitchen. I wonder where the pair is." Ankur found the door of their own room bolted from outside. The room was dark like an underground cave. He dug out his pencil torch from his cargo pants to find the electric switch. The room was suddenly washed in a bright, blinding light. They found the dinner plates laid on the small table in their room. A hot case and a flask were kept on the table. Ankur fished out a large flashlight from his backpack and walked out of the room with Mohit close at his heals. They walked towards the wing from where lunch was served—presumably the kitchen. A big latch bolted the door from outside. They managed to find the switch and discovered a clean kitchen. The utensils had been washed. They then peeped into the adjacent room. It was a pantry, now without any sign of life. Mohit called out the servants' names, but again they encountered an uncanny hush. "What the hell, Ankur, where have

they disappeared? It's still ten to six, and they said dinner would be served at six."

"I don't like it. Sorry, I chose the wrong place to come."

"Not your fault. How would you know that they give such shoddy service?" Then Mohit frowned and spoke in a whisper as if there were a lot of ears listening to him. "That means there's nobody in the lodge tonight, just the two of us." Ankur shook his head dejectedly and walked back towards the room. Mohit hurried along.

"Are you afraid too?" Mohit asked, watching Ankur bolting the door and then checking the latch of their room.

"Afraid of what? Wild animals? I'm sure there aren't big ones here—no elephants on the mountains. And only they can break open this strong door." Ankur laughed light-heartedly though he was starting to get gooseflesh.

"I am scared, Ankur. I've never lived in such a lonely place in my whole life. There is no one for miles around. We are isolated." Ankur shrugged casually though he was completely fazed by the statement. With his engorged eyes traversing around in fear, Mohit continued, "In case we need help, there is none available. Nobody will hear our cries. I'm scared that this is a deliberate move to harm us, somehow . . ." He sat down on the side of the bed and dug out a hanky from his pocket. Ankur noted that he was shivering and sweating. Wiping his face Mohit turned to look towards the window. Panic was as lucid in his eyes as the haunting silence around. He turned back and spoke almost in a whisper, "Have you seen the movie *Vacancy* ? Where a young couple gets stranded in a remote motel owned by serial killers, psychopaths, who also videotape—"

Ankur stridently snubbed him. "Mohit, stop talking about creepy stuff! Couldn't you find a better time and place to discuss horror movies? And it was just a movie." He shook his head in annoyance.

"No, it was based on a true incident. I read it somewhere." Then lowering his voice further Mohit continued, "We need to be vigilant. I mean there could be danger around and we aren't even aware. Why did the staff just disappear when there are guests in the lodge? Isn't this weird? They might be hiding somewhere to attack us at night."

"Nothing is going to happen, Mohit. Don't be a chicken. You are frightening me too, with your horror tales. You know, the Himachalis are very reliable people. I haven't ever heard of crime here." Realizing that his advice had rebounded off the petrified man like a ball from a wall, he smiled at him kindly. "Look, I've an army knife, and a bottle of pepper spray. And, I am trained in martial arts. So don't you worry. It's just tonight. Tomorrow we'll return to Kullu and find a hotel there. There are nice treks around the town.

We'll leave this place at the crack of the dawn. Okay?" He waited for Mohit's response, who nodded mildly. He seemed somewhat calmed by Ankur's statement. Ankur patted his back reassuringly. "Now get out of your wet clothes. Or you'll catch a cold."

While Mohit quickly changed, Ankur opened the flask. As expected there was hot steaming tea in it. There was a plate covered with a foil. He removed the foil and found assortment of biscuits tastefully arranged. "At least, the caretakers are feeding us well," he remarked as he poured tea in the two cups kept on the table. "Mohit, come, enjoy a hot cup of tea. What about playing music on your phone? You said you've downloaded some awesome music."

Mohit wiped his face, gave a weak smile, and joined him. He had changed into his night suit. He dragged a chair to sit next to Ankur. They drank tea in silence. Mohit played music on his phone. They listened to a few popular Bollywood numbers and tapped along with the music in an effort to uplift their damp spirits. Ankur had never seen Mohit like this—silent and unresponsive. "So, Ruhi wasn't happy that you were going on a trip without her?"

"Hmm, yes, she was a bit upset. We had an argument too. I told her I needed to chill out sometimes, refresh my mind, and a short peaceful break was all I was asking for." He scoffed. "But, not this peaceful! Good that I didn't bring Ruhi, and my darling Sheena along. They would've gone mad in this wilderness. Ruhi is very outgoing, you know. She loves hullabaloo—partying, music, dance! And Sheena has taken after her mother. She is very small but loves fun places."

"You know, Mohit, Kullu is famous for its shawls. Buy a nice expensive pashmina shawl for Ruhi, if you want to avoid her grumpy face on your return." Ankur laughed, clearly to amuse Mohit.

Mohit nodded slowly. "I will. I will buy Ruhi a beautiful shawl. She's my life, I love her. And Sheena is my darling. I don't know why I'm missing them both so much. I want to rush back to them right away." And Mohit went mute thereafter.

They had a deal not to discuss work during their holiday. And Ankur couldn't think of any topic to discuss. It was as if his mind had gone on rest mode. Mohit was being unduly morose, it was getting difficult to make conversation with him. He glanced at Mohit's listless form—his head limply resting on the back of the chair, his eyes closed. He was seemingly trying to cut himself off from the present unpleasant reality.

It was definitely a tricky situation they had got themselves into. Ankur sat thinking for a while. Why would someone try to harm them? They weren't super rich. Neither were they carrying a large amount of cash that someone

would want to steal. The caretaker and the cook seemed simple, trustworthy men, not some serial killers. *But I still don't understand why they hurried away like this, in urgency. I must confront them tomorrow.*

Tiredness overtook him. He yawned and slumped on his bed. George Michael's voice filled the room, escaped through the crevices of the walls, and serenaded through the lonely hinterland—"The strangest things, take my life, time has been twisting the knife . . ."

Ankur was so tired that within minutes he fell into a restless sleep of wild dreams. He dreamt many people had invaded their room, but he couldn't see their faces no matter how hard he tried, for darkness enveloped them. They moved around and then began dragging Mohit. Mohit was crying, resisting, extending his hand towards him, but Ankur felt helpless. He tried but couldn't get out of his bed. He was still making immense effort to rush to his friend's aid when he woke up with a start. His heart was racing. Droplets of sweat were dripping down his forehead. He found Mohit sleeping on the chair peacefully, where he had sat since their return. He heaved a sigh. *Thank God, it was just a dream, though an awful one.* "Get up, Mohit. Dinnertime now."

Mohit smiled, yawned, stretched his arms, and then stood up. "Yaar, you disrupted my lovely dream. I was floating in the stream, feeling so light and carefree. There was a group of people waiting for me—smiling, beckoning me to hurry, but then you shouted in my ears." He glared at Ankur as if he had destroyed his lottery ticket that had won him a jackpot. "Let's eat. I'm starving."

The food was still warm, and not bad. They silently ate the lukewarm rotis with lentils and *mattar-paneer* . "Krishan is indeed a good cook," Mohit spoke through his mouth full and Ankur nodded. There was delicious kheer for dessert. The food uplifted their moods.

After dinner they chatted about their dreams, the future, their families till tiredness of the journey and the day began to overtake them. At around eleven they slipped into their beds. The silence around once again began to overwhelm them. They lay in their beds silent like the night. Soft music continued to serenade through the room. The notes had changed. The music from the movie *The Fountain* was playing on Mohit's phone. It seemed so haunting, and so despondent that it began to dampen their fairly soothed spirits, trickling in melancholy and depression. Mohit let the dismal notes flow till Ankur raised an objection. "Mohit, I've had enough of your haunting music. It's good but it's making me sad. This is not the right place and time for this music. Stop it and go to sleep. Remember, we need to wake up early and quit this place."

Mohit obeyed like a dutiful child. "Yes, yes, we'll leave as early as possible.

I wake up at six. What about you?"

"Then wake me up when the washroom is free." Ankur switched off the light. The bathroom light was left on. It seeped from under the door, rescuing the room from complete darkness. Ankur wasn't very sleepy now since he had had a small nap. The loneliness became heavy on his mind, and he became more alert. He watched silver beams of moonlight filtering through the curtain of the window and spreading their aura on Mohit's bed. He watched Mohit toss and turn for a while and then he became still. He had probably gone to sleep. Ankur kept awake for quite some time, listening to the sounds of the forest—the wind whooshing through the trees, the dry leaves rustling, a distant owl hooting, the irritating cicadas going on and on with their screeches —trit-trit-trit-trit. The isolation was unnerving. He had never felt frightened like that before. Something at the back of his mind was making him uncomfortable. His mind was once again invaded by the odd events of the evening. Why had the employees of the lodge run away even before serving them dinner? It was strange. There must have been a reason behind their action. And who pushed Mohit into the stream? There wasn't a visible soul nearby. Why was the easy chair in the veranda moving, on its own, as if someone was sitting on it—watching them come in? The lodge was completely deserted; there was nobody here except the two of them. The thoughts unsettled him. *Ankur, stop frightening yourself. Just this night—we need to pass just this night here! There's no other way.* He tried diverting his thoughts to something pleasant; he thought of his family, his mom and dad, and his sister. He must buy presents for all of them. He hadn't seen them for a long time, so engrossed he had become in his work. *How we forget the importance of a family in our hectic lives!* Now he missed them immensely, especially his father—a fearless pillar of support for the whole family. He made plans to visit them over the long weekend next month. By and by he drifted into a restless sleep.

Sometime at midnight he woke up with a start. Had he heard some voices? Where was he? This wasn't his room. Why was he in this strange unfamiliar place?

It took him some time to recall where he was. Then he panicked. He and Mohit were alone in the lodge. And he had heard some voices, crystal clear in the overwhelming silence. Strange voices. Someone unknown was in the room. It was a strong feeling. No, there was more than one presence. It seemed the room had been invaded. He froze in his bed. The voices became louder; he now heard some chanting—a strange language that he couldn't understand. His heart was pounding as if it would jump out of his body. His body shivered inside the warm quilt. The sounds were originating from near Mohit's bed—an obscured, haunting, rhythmic chant. *How did they enter the*

room? The door was closed, so were the windows. He had even checked the bathroom window before sleeping. He remembered that he had left the bathroom light on. The light from there had partly seeped into the room, making everything fairly visible. Now there was only darkness. *Where is the moonlight?* He glanced at the window. Somebody, something, was blocking the light at the window. Who was there, next to Mohit's bed? He was scared. His friend was in trouble. Was he in danger? Gathering nerves, he slowly turned his head towards Mohit's bed. The moonlight now appeared, hazy, but there were shadows bending over Mohit. Ankur felt a shiver pass through his body. Was he dreaming? He slowly fisted and opened his hands. He daren't do more than that. He was petrified for he knew he was awake. There were unseen, unexplained things in the room. *Ghosts? Is that the reason the two employees of the lodge were in a hurry to leave before nightfall? Because this lodge is haunted?* The chanting stopped suddenly.

Mohit was snoring softly, totally unaware of the happenings around him. A few jackals howled from somewhere deep in the forest. Ankur shuddered. Then it became disturbingly quiet. Ankur had kept the flashlight on the table. He should have kept it next to him, on the bed, he realized. He was afraid to get out of the bed to fetch it now, lest he draw the attention of whatever was in the room. He was even afraid to move or breathe. He felt suffocated. He kept awake for about fifteen minutes, and the silence stretched on. Then he began to drift back to sleep, once again a disturbed sleep, like a half-awake mind and a paralysed body.

He must have barely slept for half an hour when he was once again woken up by a sound. It was a loud call. Had somebody said 'come'? Was Mohit saying something? Ankur's eyes flew open. He looked around to locate the source of the sound. The room was empty. Perhaps he had been dreaming. Mohit was asleep. The moonlight was brighter now, falling directly on Mohit's bed, on his white quilt, turning it into an undulating silver stream. Ankur scrutinized the space around it. There was nothing, but the sound had been loud enough to wake him up. And, it had come again from the direction of Mohit's bed. So it seemed. Window? Was there someone outside their room? Who could it be, at this late hour of the midnight and in this wilderness? Were their lives in danger? There was no network reception either. The thought was frightening; Ankur began to tremble. He cursed himself for choosing this forsaken place for his precious holiday. It was foolhardy. He had been overconfident.

And then he smiled. *Silly of me! It must have been Mohit talking in his sleep.* At the precise moment of his insight, Mohit began to rise, his head first and then he went up from his waist. Ankur watched in horror as he sat erect and

immobile on his bed for a minute, and then got out of the bed. Ankur smiled again. Of course, Mohit wanted to use the toilet. *What's going on with me? I'm pointlessly being panicky. The lonely wilderness is wracking my nerves.* Annoyed at himself, Ankur turned to his side and went off to sleep.

It was maybe an hour later that he woke up again. He needed to use the toilet. He naturally checked on Mohit. *Where is he? Toilet again?* He walked to the toilet but it was empty. "Mohit . . ." he called out. There was no response. Where was he? Had the silly man walked out? In the dark? He rushed to the door. The bolt was open. Ankur pushed the door. It didn't budge. He shook it hard and the door rattled. But it remained firmly shut. The door was obviously bolted from outside. Who did it? Mohit? But why? Apprehension invaded him like a tsunami, drowning him, suffocating him. Sweat was pouring down his forehead.

Now petrified, Ankur switched on the light and looked around for something to break open the door. There was nothing he could use. He eyed the door. It was made of solid wood. No way could he break it open using his bare hands. He picked up a chair and hit the door a number of times with it. The chair's leg broke. Apart from suffering a few scratches, the door remained obstinately shut.

Ankur retreated from the door and slowly sat on the edge of the bed, trembling, wiping the sweat off his face. Where was Mohit? If anything happened to him how was he going to explain? Would anyone believe him? *They'll say I was the last person seen with him. I will rot in a prison for the rest of my life. God, please, listen to me. Please, please God, save me, save Mohit. He's a good man. He has a family, a young wife, and a little daughter. How will I face them if anything happens to him? Please, Mohit, come back. Don't go near the stream, man. There's something there . . . or here . . .* He shifted from bed to door, from door to bed, to the window, back on a chair. He wavered between ardent prayer and mortal fear.

He needed to contact someone. *Dad!* He picked up his mobile phone and dialled his number. Nothing. There was no reception. Frustrated, he tossed the phone on the bed. This important means of communication was useless here. He boldly walked again to the window and pulled the curtain aside to peep out. It was absolutely still outside. Not a leaf stirred. Solid iron grills here barred his way out. Helplessly, he returned to sit on the chair.

There was still no sound outside, something he ardently wished for—a sound to indicate something, just anything. He sat nervously wringing his hands and praying. Then it occurred to him. *With Mohit gone—God alone knows where—I am alone now. Is it intentional? Will I be the next target? Of what? Are there really ghosts here, haunting this lodge? And do they want to harm us? There's surely something here. I got so many hints starting from the old man's reaction, but I ignored them*

all. What an idiot I've been! What do I do now? Ankur rushed to open his bag. He took out his knife and the canister of pepper spray. *Will these things work on them?* He wasn't sure. *Something has happened to Mohit. It'll be my turn next. Are these the last moments of my life?* Ankur got up and picked up his mobile. "Dear Mom and Dad," he wrote in the message. "I am stuck in a weird place. I never believed in ghosts but I'm not sure anymore. There's something here and I feel my life is in danger. If I don't see you again, please remember how much I loved you both. And my little sweet sis, Priya . . ."

At that moment, there was a sound outside. Someone was fiddling with the latch. He hurriedly clicked the send button and put the phone in his bag. His mom would get the message once there was a network. He then stood up, alert and ready, his pepper spray in his hand. The door opened and Mohit walked in. He looked at him directly, nodded, smiled and then walked back to the bed.

"Mohit, where were you, yaar? Where did you go? You scared the shit out of me. This is no way, to lock the door from outside! It can be dangerous, you know it. There's no help for us. And you walked out . . ."

"Couldn't sleep. Sat in the veranda, on the rocking chair to smoke." Mohit smiled again and got into his bed.

"I called out your name. I switched on the light. I banged the door. It could have given you the indication that I was up and worried. Still—"

"Stop complaining. Switch off the light. Sleep. We are leaving early." Mohit coughed noisily and slipped under his quilt.

"See, you've caught a chill. Shouldn't have gone out," Ankur chided him. He sat on his bed and breathed deeply in respite.

Mohit coughed for a while and then turning his back towards him, went quiet.

Ankur kept awake for quite some time. It was a big relief that Mohit was fine. *The stupid man—scared the hell out of me. Silly chap! I'm never again going anywhere with him.*

When Ankur felt disturbed and opened his eyes next, he found Mohit standing near his bed, staring down at him. *What now?* "Get up. We're leaving," Mohit spoke gruffly and walked into the bathroom.

He's got a bad throat, caught a bug. Serves him right for sitting out in the middle of the night. Strange man! This is the last time I'm coming with him for a holiday. Gave me some serious creeps. Ankur fumed while packing up and waiting for the bathroom to be free.

When Ankur came out of the bathroom, Mohit was ready with his rucksack on his back. His hurry was apparent from his half-tucked shirt, and ruffled hair. His night suit was still lying on the bed. "Mohit, you haven't even

packed everything. I know you are in a hurry to get out but . . .” Ankur picked up his clothes and stuffed them into his rucksack.

The dawn had broken through the darkness when they stepped out of their room. The cold wind swept across the wilds and brushed against their faces, making them instantly renewed and alert.

Ankur walked ahead in big strides. He was still irritated at Mohit. The shuffling footsteps assured him that Mohit was behind him, following him.

They walked in silence. The sun was slowly rising from behind the mountains; the peaks had begun to be washed in golden hues. A wonderful peace spread through Ankur. *At last, we are out. Thank God the night passed without any serious mishap.*

Soon they reached the village. Ankur halted in front of the closed door of the house where they had had tea the day before. Hadn’t the old man mentioned that his son was employed at the lodge? There were voices inside, indicating that the inmates were up. “Let’s find Kishan and Shyam. They need to be pulled up.”

Mohit quickly walked past. Ankur watched him marching ahead hastily. Soon he was quite far from him. Ankur stamped his foot in annoyance. “We could have easily spared half an hour for tea,” he yelled. He badly needed his morning cup of tea, his head had begun to throb. “Will miss the bus,” he heard Mohit’s distant voice.

What terrible moments of fear and anxiety he gave me last night! First, he was behaving like a chicken, and then walked boldly out into the lonely, fearsome night. Gave me this terrible headache. And now this weirdo isn’t stopping even for a cup of tea. Ankur gritted his teeth and rushed to catch up with Mohit.

They were soon out of the village and climbing up the last stretch towards the bus stop. Mohit continued marching ahead. Ankur was getting breathless walking uphill so fast. “What’s the hurry, chap?” he called out but Mohit refused to respond. They continued plodding without exchanging another word.

It was almost eight when they reached the road. Sweat was trickling down their necks. Sun was now up on the horizon, tossing its warmth on them. They sat on a rock, their backs touching each other, a dumb silence encasing them. The last night’s experience had been draining. Ankur was tired, still suffering from the after-effects. But they were safe. Mohit was safe, and this was reason enough to relax. The lodge was definitely haunted. The sounds were real. There had been someone unseen in their room. *Never coming here again* , Ankur silently avowed.

A bus arrived after about fifteen minutes of wait. Barring the two seats in

the middle, the rest were empty. Ankur chose to sit behind the driver's seat and Mohit slumped next to him. The conductor walked to them for tickets and Mohit totally ignored him. He continued sitting with his head drooped. *Is he already asleep? Making up for the sleep lost in his stupid midnight spree?* Ankur shook his head in derision. He was trying his best to control his unremitting irritation at Mohit. What was the point? The rest of the holiday would get spoilt. He swallowed hard and paid for two tickets to Kullu. Once the conductor moved away, Ankur heaved a sigh and sank his head into the cushy backrest. *The holiday isn't turning out to be what I had anticipated. But the dreadful part is over, thank God for that. Now it's better to throw away my anger and make up with Mohit.* He inhaled deeply, turned towards Mohit, and with an affable smile shook him lightly. "We'll look for a room at Kullu. Can also go to Manali tomorrow. What do you say, mate?" Mohit stirred and Ankur continued, "Want to do some shopping today at Kullu? Want to pick up a pashmina shawl for Ruhi? Eh? It will please her, your Ruhi."

Mohit slowly turned his head and fixed his eyes on Ankur's face. His nerve-wracking gaze drilled through him like a sharp arrow piercing his body. Ankur sucked in his breath. Mohit's bloodshot eyes were dilated and wild, his face distorted and angry. His whole demeanour was eerie, sinister, frightening. Ankur's heart raced frenziedly as Mohit curled up his lip and glowered at him with a blazing, terrifying expression. "Ruhi? Who's Ruhi?"

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